

# ANIMATION *INSIDERS*

*Workflow edition*

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend our most sincere thanks to the extraordinary animators who were involved with this book. You generously shared with us your knowledge and vision about animation. Your passion for what you do easily shows, and without you, *Animation Insiders* would never have seen the light of day.

Thank you

PATRICK BEAULIEU





# INTRODUCTION

When I was in school, it was very difficult to get valuable learning materials about animation. It seemed like the teachers were continually passing on notes that were just a copy of a copy that had been around for years. There were only two or three fundamental books on this genre, including the likes of *The Illusion of Life* and *Timing for Animation*. Now there is so much to choose from – almost too much.

*Animation Insiders* offer a new approach by compiling the various work methods of many different artists. In the industry, this is what we call “gold.” Back in the old days, many artists in the field of special effects and animation did not want to give away their secrets. At Disney, the nine old men did not pass on their knowledge and expertise until the end of their careers. Fortunately, this philosophy has changed and education has become more open and shared. My students always inspire me, because the great ones push the medium further, bringing something fresh and new to their work. Every artist must develop his or her own style; no one way is right. It’s really what works for you that ultimately wins out. This book allows you to peer into the artistic approaches of professionals, so that you can gain some insight into the way they go about solving specific problems.

It is still incumbent on you to formulate good ideas for your shots. Strong, clear and concise ideas are the most important currency in animation. When you see a well-executed idea, it almost makes you say, “Why didn’t I think of that?” When I started at Pixar in 1997, I was in awe in front of the top animators. Seeing the work of Doug Sweetland or Mark Oftedahl helped me understand what a good idea was. What I noticed about their best work was that great ideas take time to evolve. The germ of a good idea comes from so many places. It can be a stray knot in a spline that makes you see a gesture in a new light, or an odd mannerism that catches you off guard. The point is: always search for the best possible idea and never give up until you have dragged it out of your work. The best animators use every resource to enhance their work. I trust this book will be one of many in your arsenal that enable you to push your work to the next level.

ANDREW GORDON

MIKE  
NGUYEN



# BIOGRAPHY

Mike Nguyen received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Character Animation at the California Institute of the Arts in 1988. Since then, he has worked primarily in the feature animation industry in the USA as a character animator in various studios, including Walt Disney, Warner Bros and DreamWorks Animation. Among the films he had worked on are *Beauty and the Beast* and the critically acclaimed *The Iron Giant*, as a supervising animator. In 2000, he co-founded July Films, an independent theatrical animation production company, and his directing debut was the theatrical animated feature entitled *My Little World*, currently in production. He has also been a character animation instructor at the California Institute of the Arts since 1994. His primary interest is hand-drawn animation filmmaking medium, and his goal is to reflect beautiful thoughts toward this life on Earth.

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I like to approach the animated process from the inside out, allowing inward natures to dictate surface outcomes. The animated process relies heavily on the inner senses and seeks to communicate this “sensed” impression – not so much things in “actual” but in how things “feel” with roots from everyday life reality. Animated worlds, too, have their own set of reality and physics; they mirror the real world and have a degree of variation in physical attributes such as the time element, the velocity of movement and the exaggerated nature of mass.



# WORKFLOW



The keys to physical interpretation lie in the graphic styling. The more realistic the design, the closer to real time and the less exaggeration; the more caricatured the design, the greater the range of velocity and the more overstated. These variations of physics conditions affect the surface outlook of animated movements and provide clues to applying principles such as squash and stretch, timing, and exaggeration. Interestingly, the only strength of force that remains the same regardless of styling, real or imagined, is emotion. For me, the above thoughts are preconditions to approaching a particular animated being.

With regard to an animated character, my thoughts follow along this thread:

The essence of a being is the soul.

The soul inhabits a shell (character design).

The spirit of a soul (character personality) affects its shell, resulting in a distinct mannerism, in both gesture and texture of movement.

The soul has feelings and responds to life with emotions.

The temper of the soul determines the intensity of the emotion.

Emotion reflects through interaction with the shell, based on graphic looks, flexibility of skeletal structure, number of compartments, make and feel of mass, number of joints.

The strength of the emotion dictates the strength of the physical force, which in turn determines the velocity of movement and the unfolding gestures in a shell (performance).

As far as approaching a specific animated scene in the context of a film, I follow these steps. In preparation, I explore:

a/ The intent of the scene.

b/ The length of the scene.

c/ The relation to its two adjacent scenes (before and after) and film sequence.

d/ The energy of the scene from emotion to physical, feeling and tapping into its sense of force. If this is a dialogue scene, I listen to the track carefully, taking the cue of the inner force from the voice reading.

e/ Phrasing the scene to the main emotional and/or physical passages, establishing the scene's rhythm.

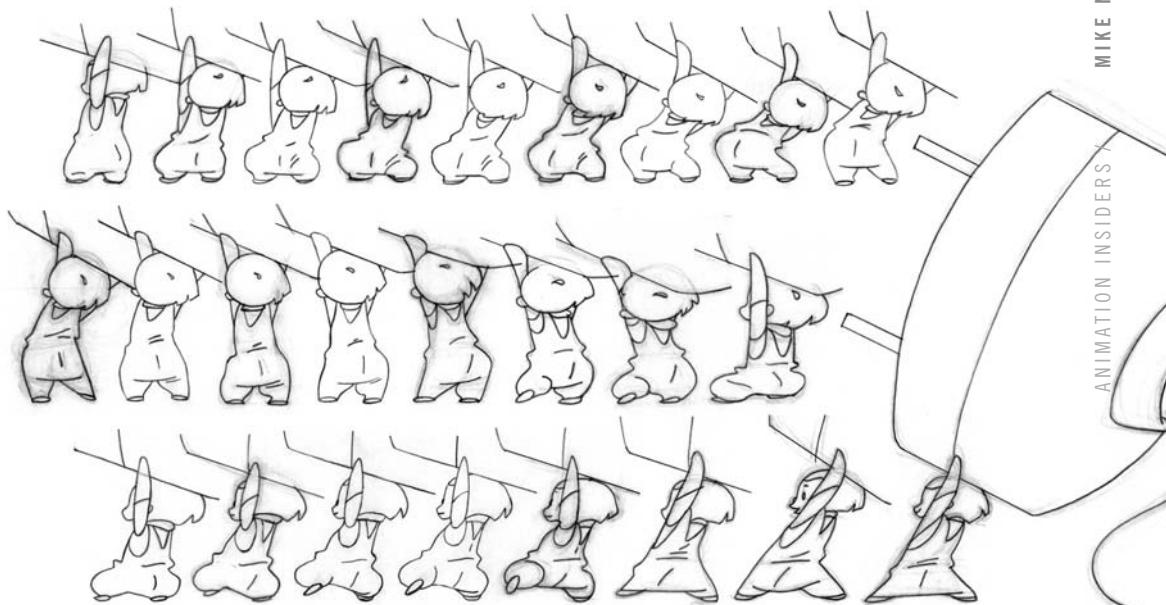
f/ Thumbnails.

g/ Pre-visualizing the scene in motion as opposed to freeze-frame thinking.

When the time is appropriate for animation, I

- a/ Start the scene with a beginning pose that leans into motion (avoid static beginning pose in most cases).
- b/ Look for poses that lead into and out, from extreme to extreme.
- c/ Keep the scene rough and loose on the first pass.
- d/ Stay natural, in both gesture and timing.
- e/ Look for the leading cause of movement (the body part that catapults the whole structure into motion); the initial spacing of a new drawing begins here.
- f/ Allow spacing to reflect the velocity of the force (fast or slow).
- g/ Delay parts; allowing the various sections of the structure to follow through in an orderly fashion, beginning with the part most immediate to the leading cause.
- h/ Look for opposing direction within the structure, further heightening the delay parts aspect when appropriate.
- i/ Assess the building blocks and layering process. Sometimes, the movement of the structure's various compartments needs to be addressed on a separately animated pass, layering from one pass to the next.
- j/ When checking animation in playback, try to be very sensitive to see whether the structure reflects the intended underlying forces through timing of movement, distortion of mass and amount of exaggeration.
- k/ Tie-down.

Well, these were just some relevant thoughts based on my personal perspective as an animator; I hope that you will find them interesting. Overall, however different our approaches may be, we are bound to attain one common end – LIFE!



EMILE

GHORAYEB





# BIOGRAPHY

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1976, in a war-struck country, Emile and his family decided to move to Canada, a place where he and his sister could have a chance at a better, easier life. His family moved to Canada when he was only one year old. They tried to move back to Beirut in 1982, but life wasn't easy, as the Israeli invasion of 1982 started just a few months after his family arrived, so they came back to Canada in early 1983. Emile grew up in Montreal, Canada. He always had animation around him, mostly because of his father. Indeed, they religiously watched the Warner Bros' *The Road Runner Show* and Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* together when he was only 3 or 4 years old. Emile's father also enjoyed sci-fi films, and he remembers watching *Alien* and *Aliens* at an extremely young age.

Emile studied 3D animation at Inter-Dec College and Fine Arts at Dawson College in his home town of Montreal during the period of 1994-1996. He got his start in the gaming community in 1997 at the renowned studio Ubisoft Entertainment and contributed to several projects in their cinematic department. His credits there include *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, *Batman: The New Adventures*, *Donald Duck Goin' Quackers* and many others. He got his first taste of film working on a film by the name of *Kaena: The Prophecy in 2001*, a co-production between France and Canada. Following that, he decided to move to Toronto to work on *Sitting Ducks* for The Cartoon Network. After finishing up production, he moved back to Montreal and worked on several Discovery Channel TV Series. Emile held many roles during these times, from animator to supervising animator, until he made "the big jump" to California in 2003.

As a character animator at such studios as DreamWorks Animation and Industrial Light & Magic (Lucasfilm, Ltd.), Emile Ghorayeb has the challenging task of translating character movements and emotions to reflect the visions of the filmmakers. The success he's had with completing this important duty can be seen in his work in DreamWorks' hit feature films *Shrek 2*, *Madagascar*, *Over The Hedge*, *Shrek The Third*, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* as well as in the spin-off short, *The Madagascar Penguins in a Christmas Caper*. He also had the privilege of supervising all the cinematics animation for the widely popular *Halo 3* game, as well as the upcoming *Halo 3 ODST* follow-up. Emile has been interviewed many times for websites like CGchannel.com, the "Meet the Artist" live interactive interview, and Q&A for CGsociety.org, and multiple newspapers and magazines.

To complete his profile, Emile chaired the 2007-2008 ADAPT Conference ([www.adaptconference.com](http://www.adaptconference.com)) in Montreal, a conference known for bringing huge talent to the northeast. He was also nominated for both Maya Master and Max Master in 2008. Finally, Emile has also contributed to Michael Bay's *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, an old dream of his which was to one day see his favorite childhood cartoon in "real life." Industrial Light & Magic has given him the opportunity not only to fulfill his dream, but to animate the character he used to consider his father figure, Optimus Prime.

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# WORKFLOW

## YOUR VISION OF THE THEME

Character animation is such a complex subject. It embodies a multitude of elements ranging from physical motion to psychology. Contrary to popular belief, character animation, especially for a film, is not just “making something/someone” move – far from it. It’s our job to make sure that Shrek is and always feels like Shrek, that Optimus Prime always feels like the Optimus we all grew up with: bold, strong, yet compassionate. It is also our job to take what someone recorded in a booth behind a microphone, with all the nuances that language and intonation can bring, and imagine how they would act and/or react to a pre-set situation. Yeah, it’s not easy, but when you’re finished, you feel a real sense of accomplishment. Animators have the power to make a scene feel sad, happy, mad, etc. We dig through our own thoughts and emotions and translate that into a character. How awesome is that?!

Some animators like to call themselves actors. I don’t agree with that at all, for the simple reason that we’re just way too neurotic – well, at least I am! Animators are also the ones everyone likes to think of as the life behind the films they make. I agree with that to a certain extent, but let’s face it, in today’s animated films and visual effects, every artist is equally important.

## ESTABLISHING THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR CHARACTER

Each project is different, and every company has a different system. No two are alike. Based on this, I could be in a situation where it’s crunch time, and I’ve been working with a particular character for so long that it becomes automatic for me and I just get in there and animate. But let’s use the beginning of a project as our example. Since DreamWorks Animation’s *Madagascar* was my first full experience from beginning to

end, we’ll use Julian, the king of the Lemurs. There were multiple animators testing him out at the beginning of the project. We all went our different ways, based on the information we were given by the directors and, of course, Sacha Baron Cohen’s vocal performance. As soon as the animation supervisor, Rex Grignon, and the directors, Tom McGrath and Eric Darnell, liked his persona and it was established, the animators had a very strong base to work with. From there, we already had a very strong base for every shot we would animate. **Understanding the character’s personality is key to getting the proper performance. Always ask yourself questions such as “Who is he?” “Why is he feeling the way he does?” “What is his relationship with the other characters onscreen?” etc. Once these questions become automatic, then can you start animating performance and not just a bunch of limbs.**

## WORKFLOW

For an animator, the word “workflow” is synonymous with the word “planning.” There are three things I always account for: artistic, technical and workflow, in that order. From an artistic standpoint, performance, staging, silhouette, recognizing beats, timing, spacing, etc., are the keys to developing an interesting shot. **From a technical standpoint, preparing your shot before you start setting keys is extremely important, so as to not get into trouble later on.** A good example is parenting and constraints. Knowing which character to parent to another, which hand will need to be constrained to which weapon and when, or should you parent the weapon to the limb: these are crucial because you don’t want the technical details to get in your way, and you don’t want to spend time fighting these and not concentrating on the artistic aspects of your job. As for workflow, basic layout, blocking, first pass, next pass, final pass are the cleanest way to work.

**Layout:** Staging, camera, composition. Many studios have a department that does this. There’s a big misconception that animators are great layout guys. Camera is set in this stage, and animators are not cameramen.

**Blocking:** It counts for 70%. It is very important here that all your extremes and some passing poses be present, as well as basic lip-sync and facial expressions, but more importantly, **the intention of the shot must be crystal clear.** This is where you sell yourself. If it’s unclear what’s going on, it is guaranteed that you’ll get notes from the director, and you don’t want that.

**First Pass:** 15%. Timing and spacing should be done here. Arcs should be almost perfect. Lip-sync and facial expressions should be almost done.

**Next Pass:** Note that this pass is usually used only if you have substantial direction changes from the director(s).

**Final Pass:** 15%. Clean it up and deliver the goods! This is where you give it the love it deserves.

## APPROPRIATE ACTING CHOICES

I don't draw very well, and let's be honest, I'm just lazy! I find myself sitting with either the animation supervisor and/or the director after I've pondered on what I would like to see, based on the sequence edit, script, storyboards, etc. Once I clearly understand my shot, I ask all my questions, such as:

- What's the intention of the shot?
- What do you think if he is doing this? Or that?
- What would you like to see here?
- Etc.

It makes it really fun to have a discussion with your supervisors. That way everyone gets to chip in together.

## VISUALIZE THE SCENE IN YOUR HEAD

It starts with a double espresso with a bit of hot AND cold water on top. Just kidding. In reality, each company has a system, meaning that you are provided with information before you start your shot. Some companies give you a lot of info, such as intention of a shot, meetings with directors, meetings with your lead and/or supervisor, etc. After you are given all the info available to you, it's your turn to, well, do your job. Animating a scene doesn't start with grab the mouse and start moving some limbs – far from it. **Planning is very important. It's like a house: if the foundation is no good, how do you expect to build on top of it properly? You can't.**

Once I am assigned a shot, I usually go to my desk, watch the sequence a few times, and try to understand it. Then I concentrate on my shot and its surrounding shots to get a better idea of what I am dealing with. Afterwards, I write all my notes, and get that info to the director, animation supervisor and lead so I can get their feedback on my ideas. Once there is an agreement, I touch the mouse. People usually ask for a timeline, but in all honesty, it really depends. It could be a really big shot, which might need a lot of choreography. Sometimes, it's a "filler" shot, which might be more straightforward. It could take an hour of planning, or it could take two or three days of thinking.

## TIPS AND TRICKS

I cannot stress enough that your blocking is *very* important for your polish phase. **Strong blocking will make it so much easier to deal with. Many animators rush to get to the polish phase and don't do strong blocking. When you do that, it's like pulling teeth to get your shot finalized and you never feel completely satisfied.** A good example of taking your time is a shot I did on *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. Bumblebee grabs the twins because they're fighting, slams them together and tosses them outside. It took me three weeks to stage it, three weeks! Now, that sounds insane, but don't forget that I am juggling other shots at the same time. But the point is that once it was staged, I was able to block my shot confidently and know that Michael Bay had signed off on it.

If you rush through your work, it will show, and it will be painful to polish.

## MAKE YOUR CHARACTER ACT OR SHOW EMOTION

**Tapping into your thoughts and emotions is always a good start to make your character show emotion.** We experience so many things in a day, week, month, year, decade, that we should always be conscious of our feelings, so we can use them later. I find myself being very aware of my emotions, and that definitely helps. But there are many, many other ways of getting this info, from watching movies to sitting at the park watching people. There are a multitude of books out there on anything from the human psyche to eyes blinking, body language, etc. The more info you can get your hands on, the better the performance you'll be able to deliver.

Listening to intonation in a dialogue is always primordial to understanding what a character is thinking, and what a character is thinking is the most important aspect you should always think of. **ALWAYS ask yourself that question: what is he/she thinking?** Too often I have seen animators just move things, and it always ends up emotionless.

## THUMBNAILS – PLANNING

I don't do thumbnails, because I don't draw very well. But many animators do, and it definitely helps. I write all my notes down in point form to make sure I don't forget anything. I usually end up with a very, very long list. LOL. Whatever you can do to make sure you don't forget anything, do it.

## ACT IT OUT

Sometimes you have to. Most good studios are equipped with recording rooms for animators. Even though you can imagine it in your head, sometimes you're doing a very complex movement, so it's best to act it out, and if you can, record it. You should also use a mirror for facial expression. Act out your dialogue. DreamWorks has a webcam attached to every animator station so that animators can record themselves acting out their lines. A very, very cool tool, indeed. You can record as many takes as you want and see which best fits your shot.

## REFERENCE

Most of the time I can get away without referencing, but even today, after thirteen years, I sometimes need to get some sort of reference. YouTube and the web are quick and dirty ways to get some general reference.

## STUDY FOR PERFORMANCE

Your eye develops over time and you find yourself analyzing everything. Whenever I see a performance that strikes me, I usually rewind, watch, and do it all over again until I am satisfied. But I have to admit, my favorite "studying" is everyday life. Whether it's watching others having a beer on a sunny day or playing with my daughters and watching how they act and react. For all the animators reading this, the world is our oyster, so keep your eyes peeled!

# PABLO NAVARRO



# BIOGRAPHY

I was born 32 years ago in Buenos Aires, Argentina; I'm the older of two brothers. Since I was a kid, the only way my mother could manage to keep me quiet and out of trouble around the house was by giving me a pencil and a piece of paper. I spent entire days drawing and drawing – this way she could have some quiet time for herself! Both of my grandmothers took turns every weekend to take me to the circus or to the movies. I loved both as a kid, but what I enjoyed most was the movies. I would spend the entire day in the cinema watching Tom & Jerry cartoons and old Disney classics! The show was continuous and when it ended, well, it started all over again! My poor grandmother would spend hours watching those cartoons over and over just because I was captivated by animation.

Many years later, when I explored and studied animation, I realized why I loved all the Disney cartoons and why I didn't like all the Tom & Jerry ones... It was a matter of quality. I realized that the ones I remembered best were the first cartoons directed by Hanna-Barbera and produced by Fred Quimby; those ones had a full animation quality. I always remember this, and I keep it in mind when a producer, production manager or someone working in animation comes to me and says, "Make it faster!! No one will tell the difference anyway. The audience are kids and they don't know about quality, so... meet the deadline and stop doing nice animation!" Well, I was a 4-year-old kid and I remember some of those cartoons I didn't like, and it was due to bad animation. Of course, at that time I could not have said with these exact words "I don't like this cartoon because of the quality of the animation," but there was definitely something wrong with those cartoons. So my life was good back then: candy, cartoons, and grandmothers taking me out to fun places... Yeah, those were cool times until I was 6.

One day, my parents realized that life in the big capital city was a mess, and they decided to move the family to a province in the country, away from the stress of the big city. They wanted to find a place where they could raise a family and have the time to enjoy it... a nice, pure thought, if you ask me. So my mother, my father, my brother and I got a nice house on the countryside, with dogs, cats, cows, pigs, rats, snakes, bugs, and rabbits (in that order) – you know, the whole countryside life thing! When we were living in the city, we were economically successful. In short, we had money – lots of it! But when we moved to the country, things got complicated and we fell into poverty, more or less. So the candy, circus, movies and cartoons were all over. At the age of 8, I had to start working to help support the family: my mother worked, my father worked and I had to work as well. I mostly helped my father in the fruit plantations. Needless to say, it was a big shock for him: he had been a renowned mechanic earning a big fat juicy salary every month. He used to work on race cars, and now he was driving a truck for a few bucks. Worst of all, he could not afford to hire someone to help him, so it was me helping him! My younger brother was only 4 years old then, too young to help.

I won't say more about those years. There are enough stories to make an entire book. I am only trying to set the scene. Those were hard times... but I learned so many good things: the power of hard work and the importance of never giving up on what you believe in and love. I have found out since then that if you want to succeed in animation, you need those two things: hard work and perseverance. It's a hard media, with many obstacles that only a tenacious mind can handle. Imagine giving up after the second time you try to draw or pose your animation character, or even settling for an easier pose that does not properly communicate the intended feeling... if you did, you would be finished! It takes patience and focus to become a good animator, mostly because you have to challenge yourself and your limitations.

To get back to the story of my life, not everything was sorrow. Of course not! We had really cool times there, too. Most important of all, I still spent my free time drawing, remembering images from cartoons and comic books. We couldn't afford to buy comics or to go to the movies, and there was no cinema in our little town, anyway. Therefore, I drew

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my own comics and I really enjoyed it. I spent those years working on the plantation, going to school and... yes, drawing! It's funny how not having toys leaves the door wide open to individual imagination. Sometimes when it was raining, I would use wet mud to sculpt my own action figures, a really cool exercise! Sculpting gives you so much understanding of volumes and shapes: a helpful skill for your drawings.

A family friend was my mentor during those years. He was a renowned artist, a painter married to an outstanding sculptress. He used to tell me not to "copy" Spiderman, but to focus on observing nature. He would say, "Pablo, learn to observe nature and people, so you can develop your own perception of things and not copy someone else's." I was a kid, and to me, it was much more fun to draw Spiderman than to draw a tree, but over the years, I came to appreciate his advice. It's like people who copy cubism from Picasso. He was an outstanding artist. He drew and painted the human figure with exquisite accuracy, and once he got tired of perfectionism, he decided to try something new and more challenging: he invented cubism. The people who copied him missed out on the value of exploring and gaining knowledge; they reaped the fruits without planting the seeds. Picasso once said something along these lines: "Someone who copies a style is an artist, and someone who steals a style and makes it look like his own is a genius!"

The very same principle can be applied to limited animation. At one point in my career, I taught animation for two years. I had teenagers in my classes who wanted to learn animation. When I started the course, one would exclaim, "Oh no no! I like Anime and Manga. I don't want to learn full animation, I just want to learn limited animation." Well, I have news for everybody out there: **trying to do limited animation without learning basics of animation is just a cheap excuse not to spend time learning.** It won't work! Why? Because limited animation is the simplification of animation, and if you don't know what to simplify, how can you make something good out of it? We could say that the fathers of limited animation are Hanna-Barbera, and like Picasso, before coming up with the solution of limited animation for their problems with TV air times, they were doing full animation and the results were brilliantly crafted. Do you really think that if they didn't know how animation works, they could have achieved such a style? In my opinion, the answer is no.

**"PABLO,  
LEARN TO OBSERVE  
NATURE AND PEOPLE,  
SO YOU CAN  
DEVELOP YOUR  
OWN PERCEPTION  
OF THINGS  
AND NOT COPY  
SOMEONE ELSE'S."**

I guess I wandered off course just now, so let's go back to the story I was telling. Over the years, our financial situation got a little better; my parents opened a truckers' restaurant on the road that became quite successful. My brother and I were the waiters. School was finished and it was time for me to decide what I would study next, a big step for a teenager. I always knew that I wanted to be an artist, and so I told my parents and we discussed the pros and cons of being an artist. "A-hard-to-find profession," they said. We finally agreed that I would pursue more practical studies and when I was finished, I would do whatever I wanted with my life. I spent six long years studying "electro-mechanics" and I became an "electro-mechanics technician." Many people thought it was a waste of time, but with a technical background, I gained perspective on drawing and animation from the architecture and physics I studied. Both these subjects were tremendously helpful in animation. I learned how and why things moved in one way or another if you apply a particular amount of force. Like I said, that is really helpful for a potential animator!

So, that was the end of my career as a technician and it was time for me to do whatever I liked with my life. It was time to leave the nest! I got my backpack, my sketchbook, a few pairs of underwear (clean ones), and moved back to the capital to find a place where I could develop my artistic skills. **My father gave me one last bit of advice: "Son, I don't think that what you're doing is appropriate, but this is your life-long dream and I know you have a talent for drawing, so I wish you the best of luck!"** He continued: "Luck is a funny thing. I was the best mechanic ever. I had talent, lots of it, but you know what made me successful in my career? A lucky strike!! And when that lucky opportunity came around, I had the talent to make the most of it! So, son, I hope you will find that lucky strike; I know you have the talent to make the best of it!"

Yeah, those were my father's words. My mother couldn't say much: she was crying because I was leaving home... so I got kisses and hugs from her! There I was, an 18-year-old with a backpack full of clean underwear and a dream to fulfill. I moved in with one of my grandmothers, the one who used to take me to the circus as a child. I was ready to find a place where I could study art.

At the time, I didn't know that animation involved a different kind of artists called animators. I thought that a regular artist could do everything: from painting a picture to drawing comics and ultimately doing animations. So I checked the fine art schools in Buenos Aires: there were none that I was interested in. I found them to be a bit too "bohemian," shall we say, and I wasn't there to waste time on stupid battles about modern crap and real art. I had that cleared up already. I finally found an academy of cartoonists that I joined for one year, but I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was wasting my time: I wasn't learning about animation. I have to say that Argentina is not a country with a big animation culture. There are no proper animation schools. Once in a while, someone would give animation classes, but in most cases you paid a lot and learned nothing. I discovered that there were better schools outside Argentina, like CalArts in the United States or Gobelins in France. That, unfortunately, was not an option for me: I couldn't afford great schools.

I was struggling. I wasn't able to find an artist's job and wasn't able to find a proper school. I was in trouble. Nevertheless, I was determined to become an artist, no matter what. I could not disappoint myself. Eventually, the lucky strike came just in time! I was searching the newspaper for a job that could sustain me financially when I came across an ad saying "animation classes, taught by professionals of the media, job opportunities." I got there faster than lightning. The classes were really expensive but I had to make the effort and pay the price. I started doing the bouncing ball exercise. Who hasn't done that? I don't need to say how amazed I was to watch that ball bounce. It was really cool! Because of my physics background, it was quite easy to understand the slow in-and-out movement. It certainly looked natural to me.

The company that was offering those classes had a plan: they were searching for talent while raking in tuition money. I spent three months on bouncing balls, walk cycles, squash and stretch tests – the usual – until the teacher (an old animator from the old Argentinean school) came to me, took me outside the class, and said, "Pablo, this company

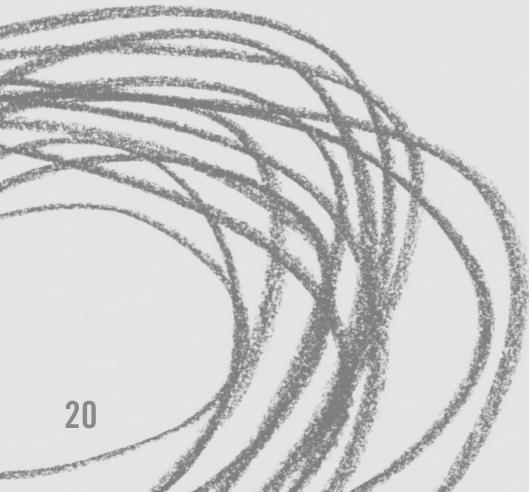
has seen your work and they want you to do a test tomorrow for a job." That was the happiest day of my life! Finally, I had an opportunity to work in animation! The next day I was there, happy and nervous – maybe too nervous. The job offer was for doing final line inking on a commercial for some lollipop thing. The studio was the biggest commercial animation company in Argentina, really important in the media. I had to ink the animation with a Rotring pen 0.5. I was used to those because of the architecture experience in school, but I was too nervous and my racing pulse tricked me: I didn't draw a single good line all day, just trembling, shaky things I couldn't control. The company owner looked at them and said, "You're not made for this. Thank you for your time. Go home now. We made a mistake with you." I was devastated, but the first words that came out of my mouth were "Give me another chance tomorrow and I'll show you the best ink line you've ever seen." The boss laughed and said, "You have the right attitude! You can have another chance tomorrow. But if you don't do it right, it'll be your last."

I spent that day and the whole night inking things on paper. My grandmother was really worried. She thought I had gone crazy, I guess. "Can't eat...inking..." The next day I was there again – my eyes were so tired that I had to make a big effort just to keep them half-open. The boss saw me and said, "What happen to you, kid?" I had blisters on my fingers from the long night of inking and not eating. I said, "Just give me the test, please." I did it. The guy came, looked at the drawings, looked at me, at my blistered hands, at the drawings again, and then he said, "Go home now, get some sleep. You start tomorrow." Finally, a job in animation!!! Final line inker! It was modest but it was a nice way to start!

But inking drawings wasn't exactly what I wanted to do in animation, so I started to prepare myself to become an animator. As I said before, Argentina did not have any proper animation schools, **so I started learning by myself, asking the animators in the studio, reading books and watching a lot of movies.** Then I realized that the animation done at the studio was not comparable to a full animation feature film, mostly due to the killer deadlines we had. Commercials are like that: deliver it for yesterday! My ambition was to work in feature film. I spent a lot of time trying to identify the differences between full animation and the TV kind of animation that my colleagues were doing for the commercials. It was hard; I had to figure it out on my own. I read *Illusion of Life* many times, but it's a book that leaves you with more questions than answers, unless you have a bit of animation experience. Despite that, I learned a lot from it and continue to do so to this day!

Anyway, I wanted to animate but I wasn't ready yet. After a few months inking drawings, I was promoted to inbetrerer. Now that was more like it! I spent an entire year doing inbetrers, and I became the favorite of the animators. I understood what they wanted so well that they were very happy with the final work. I used that time of my life to focus and learn about how the animators achieved movement and acting with the characters. Being an inbetrerer was a great way to learn the importance of timing, by digging in the timing

I WAS DETERMINED TO BECOME AN ARTIST, NO MATTER WHAT.



THE MOMENT  
YOU THINK  
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ANY FURTHER.

of the scenes themselves! In addition, it really helped me improve my drawing skills. A year later, I was promoted to assistant animator. I started refining the rough animations from the animators and tying down the scenes. Again, a great experience! I spent a year and a half doing that type of tasks, until one day, the studio had too much work and no available animators to do it. Again, the lucky strike my father talked about! They gave me a couple of scenes to animate, and I applied all the things that I'd learned over those two years. The result was great! Everybody was happy! I then became a regular animator at the studio, but it had nothing to do with being a “real” animator. I knew that animating a couple of scenes didn't make me an animator because I recognized that I had so many limitations and so many things to learn. I sincerely didn't dare call myself an animator until many years later.

As trivial as it may sound, that was one of the reasons I sought to improve my animation. The moment you think “I know it all, I have nothing else to learn,” well, you are stuck and your craft will never progress any further. The studio was a hard place to work. Many hours at the desk, sometimes even days without going home. But the most difficult thing – and the strangest – was that the owner wouldn't let us do line tests of our work! A really crazy thing! He believed that it was a waste of time and would not allow us to shoot a couple of layouts to see the action. This was a source of frustration for us because we were expected to do error-free animation, so we were forced to master the art of “flipping” the animation. Our hands and arms were like living line-tester machines! I cursed that practice because of all the pressure to create something good without even knowing what the end result would look like. Now I appreciate the “problem” and consider it extremely good practice that taught me to fine-tune the timing of my animations. At times, I would even find myself unconsciously doing a capture of the animation for every drawing or pose I do on the computer! In the long run, it doesn't matter, since you get a better result! Besides the commercials, we were working on a weekly TV sitcom titled *Dibu, Mi Familia es un dibujo*. It was a really painful production, due to the endless prints of the live-action rotoscoping and the obnoxious deadlines. Just imagine: we had to do a 23 minute-episode every week and the show was only one episode ahead!

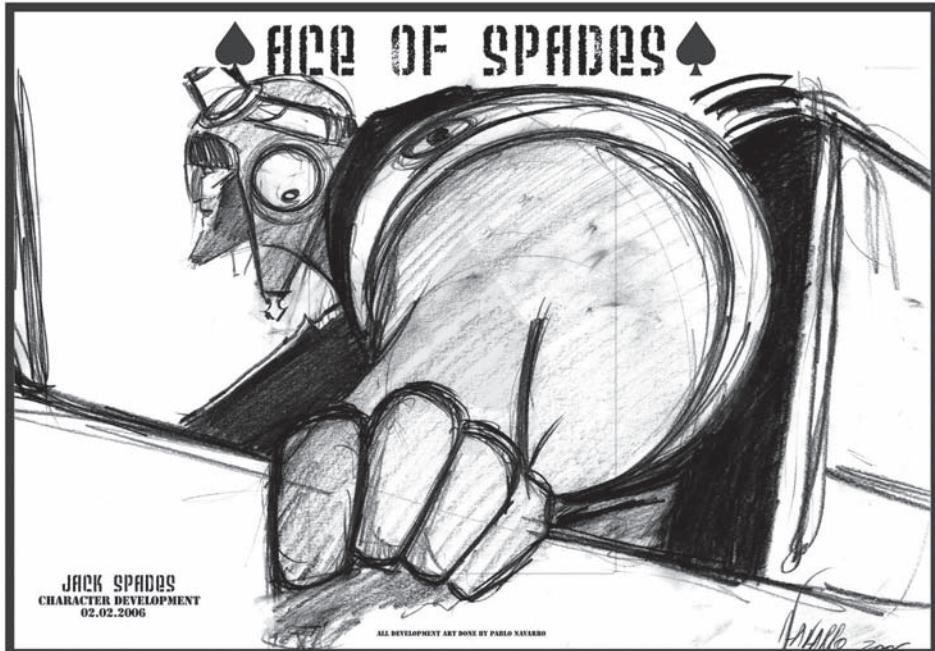
I worked for that studio from 1995 to 2000. By 1998 I had animated about 50 commercials and directed the animation for many of them. By that time, as well, the studio had expanded and started undertaking the most beautiful thing there is... making movies! One such movie was called *Los Pintin al Rescate*, based on an animated one-minute-long TV sitcom episode that our studio had already done. I acquired more responsibilities then. I was leading a team of four artists... I was the lead animator! It was another difficult production: we had to produce three seconds (150 frames) of clean animation per day, and again the studio became my home. Nevertheless, what continued to drive me crazy was that even in a movie, I wasn't able to do what I wanted: full animation. And believe me, I tried! Unfortunately, with those deadlines, it was practically impossible. I had another problem then: as lead animator, I couldn't do better quality animation than the rest of the team. It would have been harmful to the general quality. So as painful as it was, I had to slow down my creativity to match the production canons. It was sad, but true. I was increasingly dissatisfied with the style and quality of animation that my country was producing. **Therefore, during the very little free time I could manage, I started animating things on my own at home. While my friends were partying all night long, I was home drawing and drawing!**

Sooner or later animation becomes time-demanding; the sooner you dedicate time to your career, the sooner you'll enjoy it! At times, animation looks like a monk's path: you have to pour all your time and all your “devotion” into it, and avoid temptation. Now that I had a little experience in animation, my next dream was to have the opportunity to work on a feature film for a major company. Sadly that opportunity didn't come. I didn't send my portfolio to Disney or DreamWorks (the two companies I wanted to work for) because I thought my skills weren't adequate yet. What a shame! By the time I was ready to send my stuff out, Disney and DreamWorks – like most animation companies in the world – had closed their traditional feature animation doors. It was a big shock for me and many artists. It has been a thorn in my side, this dream I couldn't achieve.

Meanwhile, we finished that movie and started another one – business was good! The next movie was *Patoruzito*, based on a legendary Argentinean comic book. We started production, and this time I had more time to animate! The animation was getting better, and I did good quality full animation. However, half way through the rough animation, it was cancelled by the partner studio and the owner of the character's rights. It is so painful when you work on something that never makes it to the screen! After this incident, the studio switched back to commercials. Unfortunately, the market had already been overtaken by other companies and that was the end of our studio. It closed its doors, back in year 2000, and we were all loose on the streets. I worked as a freelancer for two feature films: one for Chile called *Ogu y Mampato* and the other one for Argentina called *Micaela, una aventura animada*. My experience as a freelance animator was terrible; in both movies, as soon as I delivered the scenes, they ran away with my artwork and I was never paid.

**It was a dark period; I was tired after all those years of hard work.** Yet I never lost my passion for animation, and I was still studying at home and going to live drawing sessions. One day, after a long day working on a commercial as a freelancer, I arrived home to an answering machine message. It was a female voice with a thick French accent. She was offering me a character animator position in a feature film produced in Spain! Given my youth, my sense of adventure and my disillusionment with my country's poor animation, I decided to accept the job right away!

My friend and I went and worked together; we made an incredible team. His name is Pedro Blumenbaum, a really good animator! We arrived in Valencia, Spain, in July 2001. It was a high quality move to a major company in Spain: Filmax Animation. The movie was called *El Cid, the Legend*. I have to admit that, initially, it tested everything I knew, and if I hadn't studied so much in my free time back in Argentina, I wouldn't have been able to do it. We were the first animators to work on the movie, so we started doing animation tests on the characters until, working with animation director Javi Martin, we finally established the quality level for the whole movie. Consequently, a year later we were promoted to animation supervisors. It was strange for me: I was 25 years old and I was supervising Disney animators and people that



ACE OF SPADES – JACK DEVELOPMENT

I had read about in books and whose names I had seen in the credits of many movies! But it was cool! As a supervisor, I liked to get the best out of the animators. I had worked under so many bad supervisors (to put it mildly), so maybe this is why I had a good sense for how to do it properly.

We were in charge of overseas studios as well as in-house animators and Spanish studios. Sometimes it was so time-demanding that, again, I spent my weekends and slept at the studio, due to the time lag between countries. This is when I realized that the Oriental culture has a different acting style. On different occasions, it was a nightmare to get a good acting result from a China-based studio. It wasn't because they were bad animators – we chose the best studios, so quality was not an issue. It was a cultural thing: east does not meet west. We tend to overlap the actions more while they just do one thing at a time. But by the end, we were getting good results! Three years later we finished the movie; I was quite famous in the Spanish media by then. Many years after that movie, I still encounter some of the animators I worked with, and they still thank me for my supervision. That's something that encourages me to keep doing things right!

The next movie was *Nocturna*, also by Filmax Animation. I was offered the position of animation director, and despite my interest, I had to decline because of the low salary. Then Filmax offered me another position on a



CG project called *Donkey-xote*, I had to move to a Filmax-owned studio called Bren Entertainment in Galicia. The movie was in pre-production and our task – my friend and I – was to raise the quality of the animators. We went there and started working. The production had many internal bureaucratic (producer/director) problems, and the artistic job was obviously quite difficult to achieve in these conditions. Even though I spent only a year and a half on that movie, I developed a muscular system for the character facial setup; I supervised the rigging and setups for the characters, mostly the four-legged ones, since I had specialized in animal mechanics over the years. No one else at the studio had animal experience, and in addition of the main character, the story was full of horses and donkeys. I did countless animation tests, testing the setups and riggings, stuff usually done in pre-production! Sometime during that year, I started writing a book about the mechanics and locomotion methods of four-legged animals that I have yet to finish... as soon as I get some free time!

I worked with director Joseph Pozo, who had also been the director of *El Cid, the Legend*. I assisted him and reviewed the script of the movie, too. Eventually, the situation became too weird to handle. What the director would approve, the producer would throw away and vice versa, until it was impossible to go forward. Most annoying of all was that the script was turning into a cheap “I don’t want my name in the credits!” thing, so I had to step back and leave the project for the sake of my own mental wellbeing. By that time, *Nocturna* was in pre-production and the budget had enormously increased since last discussed, but the animation direction position was already taken. They offered me the position of character animation supervisor and assistant director of animation. I was in love with the project and I just had to say yes! Sadly, my friend Pedro was tired of the situation and he returned to Argentina: the team was no longer. A few months later, I moved back to Barcelona to work on *Nocturna*.

THIS WAS  
A MOVIE  
WHERE I WAS  
ABLE TO DO  
THE BEST JOB  
OF MY LIFE!

The directors of *Nocturna* were the art directors of *El Cid, the Legend*, Adrian Garcia and Victor Maldonado, two incredibly gifted artists with sensitivity and a high sense of design. The story was an original story straight from their heads (big ones!). This was a movie where I was able to do the best job of my life! I started working with a super-talented French guy named Julien Bizat, who re-designed the characters of the whole movie, providing much-needed extra appeal! So, here we go: I got a new teammate! We worked for almost a year developing the ways that the characters would move and act. I was in charge of the Cat Shepherd and the cat pack, and Julien and I developed the character Tim together. The character of the Cat Shepherd was complicated: he was a creature, not an animal, not a human, not a stuffed doll, just a weird character. I came up with the solution of mixing several animal behaviors from different animals such as feline, gorilla and bear... complicated but it worked! It was the coolest of times, preparing a character, deciding how it would move and act, discovering the personality based on a script – a really fun job!

When the production started, we had a lot of information for the animators. We were the character supervisors. We started animating in a sequence that would be used as a quality reference for the rest of the team and studios. Mid-production, I received a call from Disney animator Sergio Pablos. He had a studio called Animagic in Madrid, and he was also working on *Nocturna*. He was searching for animators who specialized in horses to work on *Spirit II*. Even though the project never came to be, we had the chance to meet each other and stay in touch. **He’s one of my animation heroes, along with Frank and Ollie, James Baxter... If you’ve seen the animation of Sergio in *Treasure Planet*, you know what I mean when I say his work is astonishing!** In the meantime, his studio needed some help finishing some sequences for the movie *Asterix and the Vikings*, so at night I was working for him as a freelance animator from home.

A year later, I was asked to move from Barcelona (where Filmax Animation had its main studio) to Madrid, where one of the studios involved in the movie called *Monigotes* was having some quality issues, mainly due to the lack of feature film experience among the animators. I was sent to “teach” the animators the proper way to animate those particular characters. I started assisting the director of animation at that studio, Valentin Amador, another incredible artist, and helping out at Sergio Pablos’ Animagic, which needed a hand to accomplish certain tasks. **In Madrid, I met my wife-to-be; she is from Barcelona, but I met her in Madrid – craaazy! I just want to thank her for her patience with my career. It’s not easy to be with an animation artist.** Anyway, that movie came to an end, and it was a sad event because of all the great times I had working on it. Filmax Animation closed their doors to traditional animation and, a couple of years later, even to CG Animation, so the opportunities of getting a job in good quality movies were very slim.

I went back to Barcelona and started working for ACCIO Studios on a movie called *Flying Heroes* and later renamed *Cheramy*. I worked for a year on that movie as a senior character animator. ACCIO was a small studio, almost a family business. I did a lot of animation and I was paid for it, period. They were like a “closed society”: no matter who you were or what you had done before, they did not give you the chance to improve things, so I just did what they wanted and got paid (sometimes!). By the end of that movie, things were unsure in the animation industry, and there was not much work to do. So I went back to my roots, making some commercials for the US with a Barcelona-based agency, and, at the same time, I taught animation in an Art Academy in Barcelona. Afterward, another movie came out about the history of Latin Jazz in Cuba and the US, a love story about a Cuban singer and her pianist. It was a nice script and the project included renowned director Fernando Trueba and the famous designer Javier Mariscal; I was offered the position of director of animation and once again I accepted.

The idea was to completely shoot the movie in live action and have it rotoscoped later, with the characters acting in the beautiful landscapes and locations designed by Mariscal. I’m not fond of the technique but that’s what they wanted. I developed the work flow system and the procedures to make it effective, but the studio owner was a very hard guy to work for. He is really talented, but his extreme mood swings and his lack of respect made the experience a living hell. He would come in the

morning and say hello, and ten minutes later he would come to your desk and literally destroy your work for no reason at all. Having the studio owner tear your work sheet by sheet from your hands as he insults you and your mother was not the best working environment. He always kept saying that he hated animators because they think of themselves as “gods,” but that the only god in his studio was him. I have always been very patient, though, even more so with people with enormous artist egos. But his actions were not helping the movie production, and as soon the pre-production budget was used up things started going bad. One day after having had a shoe thrown at my head for no legitimate reason, I picked up my belongings and walked away. I have friends who are still working on that movie now and they claim that he is a bit calmer and less volatile, thanks to some medication.

It seems that my professional life was taking a strange and rough path, and after so many great experiences, I suppose I had to taste the oddities of the media industry. It didn’t end there. Even though we are almost at the end of my work biography, what is to come is the craziest experience that I have ever had. After quitting, I received a call from Fernando Moro, a colleague I had supervised on *El Cid* and a big name in Spanish animation. This incredible artist was directing the animation on the biggest budget movie ever produced in Spain: *Planet 51*, a cutting-edge comedy produced in CG by Ilion Studios. I was offered the position of senior animator. My problem was that I needed to move

back to Madrid and really... I was a bit tired of moving. I said “no,” but they really wanted to recruit me, so I got many calls. Finally, since every man has his price, I agreed. I was welcomed with open arms and salutations from everybody. By this time, I was quite well known in the media, and many people I had already worked with were there too. It was like a reunion with old friends. They gave me a computer station, the guidelines, the procedures and a cup of coffee with the movie characters stamped on it.

Days passed, and I still hadn’t received any scenes to animate, apparently due to some production problem. Meanwhile, I was given an acting test to do. I did the test and everybody was happy: the animation director, the animation leads supervisors – everybody except one of the directors, who kept correcting my tests. I altered the acting about 40 times, and nobody else understood what was happening, since they all thought I should have been doing the scenes not repeating silly tests. Initially, I thought I was being psychologically challenged to determine how much pressure I could handle. They gave me another test. I did that one too, and everybody was astonished that the same guy still didn’t like it. I made so many changes to that test! I ended up spending four months on it. One day, the same director was in Los Angeles recording the voice talents, and one of the lead animators asked me to do some scenes that he couldn’t do; so I thought my luck had started to change and I immediately blocked the animation and had



ACE OF SPADES – COLOR CONCEPT 1



ACE OF SPADES – COLOR CONCEPT 2

KEEP DREAMING,  
AND ALWAYS  
KEEP YOUR PASSION  
FOR ANIMATION!  
NOTHING IS  
IMPOSSIBLE  
TO ACHIEVE:  
I'M LIVING PROOF  
OF THAT. IT JUST  
TAKES TIME  
AND EFFORT, AND  
IF YOU INVEST  
BOTH, YOU WILL  
GO FORWARD.

it approved by the director in LA via email. Afterwards, I sent him the refine and had that approved also, with a nice comment! I completed the scenes on Friday and on Monday morning I found a “you are fired” note on my desk. Apparently this guy had something against traditional artists who could animate CG, because the moment he got back to the studio and realized that the scenes he had liked had actually been done by me, he just fired me.

It was the first time in my life that I was fired from a job – and for doing it right, of all the things! The work atmosphere was not right in that studio; I had never felt that CG would be my enemy until I got there... oh man! If you're a traditional artist, you're doomed! It's a really big shame, because I like animation in general in all its forms: I can do traditional just as well as CG animation. Funny story, huh? Fortunately, the last jobs I have had are an oasis in my career, going back to what I like, away from crazy guys throwing shoes at you or firing you because of your professional background. I was lucky to work again with the directors of *Nocturna* and their teammate, Alfredo Torres, a great artist! Two upcoming projects that are even nicer than *Nocturna* are *Ms. Colleau* and *The Strange Case of Dad's Missing Head*, absolutely amazing projects! I hope that soon everybody will hear about them, and they will eventually be produced! So let's keep our fingers crossed!

Right now, besides these jobs, I'm developing my own feature film project titled *Ace of Spades*, a nice story about friendship, with the philosophical question “What makes people act heroically?” Is it because they are Good Samaritans, or is it a plain display of selfishness? I'm searching for producers right now! And I am still writing that book about the locomotion methods of four-legged animals, as well as doing commercials every now and then for the US and different countries in Europe. So that's my life story so far. From NOTHING and struggling hard to being a hero – halfway through so far! I hope you enjoyed reading it and found some of the experiences described here helpful to you. Keep dreaming, and always keep your passion for animation! Nothing is impossible to achieve: I'm living proof of that. It just takes time and effort, and if you invest both, you will go forward.

IT'S VERY  
IMPORTANT  
TO LOCATE YOUR  
CHARACTER  
IN THAT  
“CHARACTER'S  
PERSONAL  
EVOLUTION  
CURVE”

# WORKFLOW

## A/ ESTABLISHING THE PERFORMANCE OF YOUR CHARACTER

Usually when I receive a scene or a sequence to animate, **I spend some time thinking and analyzing where in the movie it will take place, or in which sequence.** It's important to find out the “curve” of the character along the story, and by the curve of the character I mean that every character (if the script is a good one, of course) has a personality in the beginning and evolves into something else in the middle and at the end of the story. It's very important to locate your character in that “character's personal evolution curve”; if you achieve that, then the spectrum of acting is limited to more accurate options with respect to the character's behavior in general and to the other main and supporting characters.

Imagine you have a character who is very sure of himself, and mid-movie, he discovers that all his life has been a lie. For instance, his parents are not his biological ones...well, then you have a “curve”! You should not portray him as overconfident at that point because his entire world has fallen apart! This adds depth to the character, and that is exactly the goal animators seek to achieve: credibility! So what I do? I follow the advice of the nine old men: “Monday no drawing, Monday thinking.” It means that when I get the scene, I think about it. Only later do I start experimenting with a pencil in my hand!

I also have to say something else regarding my work experience: this search for proper acting may be different depending on your position in the production and the type of production. If you are a character animator led by an animation supervisor, an animation director or a character supervisor, then you are in a perfect world. In this situation, the supervisor should give these guidelines to both you and the director

of the movie. But often you will find yourself asking your directors for these guidelines and they will say “What are you talking about!?” Then you know that you are working on a production that is beneath your animation skills and standards. If that is the case, you can still do this preparation of the character, but chances are that not all the animators will do it. This leads to inconsistency in the storytelling, with “strong, convincing acts” versus “pre-fabricated, formulaic acts.” Nevertheless, you don't need to worry about that. **All you need to focus on is achieving the best work you can**, even though some directors may ask you for the opposite – another sad thing that may happen!

If you are the director of animation or the character supervisor, then it is your job to prepare things. You have to know everything about the character or characters you are leading, to guide your team of animators in the right direction! Frankly, I have had very few such opportunities. Usually the productions are governed by budgets and deadlines, and production managers tend to keep the vital “mental research” about the characters as short as possible to ensure the timely completion of the work at a minimal price; the result, sadly, is inconsistency everywhere! It takes more time to do something wrong than to do it the proper way – believe me when I say that I've seen this many times! This prepping technique is for feature films only, since if you're working on TV series or commercials, you won't have the time – sad but true. Taking note of this will definitely save you many headaches, and most importantly, will ensure you have the proper mind set for the kind of production you are working on. But remember that no matter how much effort you put into it, it's always hard for a zealous animator not to look back at the end of the production and feel ashamed of his work; that's why it is always best to do the best you can!

## B/ TIPS AND TRICKS

Workflow! Well, I don't follow a rigid, set way of doing things regularly, except when initially planning a scene. **I believe that the workflow depends on the experience you have.** I mean, your way of work is not

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the same at the beginning of your career as later. The biggest tip I can give you is that you should use whatever makes you feel comfortable. I remember when I first started I was told that animators made thumbnails for the animation and I lived by that “holy” rule. So I spent many hours making thumbnails; sometimes it was helpful, and sometimes it was just a nightmare, even though I still forced myself to do the thumbnails for every scene I was given – big mistake!

I discovered over the years that in my particular case, it was helpful to do thumbnails just when I felt I needed them. Up to the moment I realized this, my workflow was a living hell. I would spend so much time doing something useless, and by the time I finish the thumbnail, I could not finish the animation on time for the deadline. Therefore over the years, I learned to make my workflow “à la carte,” depending on the type of scene. This works for me, but it may not work for somebody else. You see, people are different and they should each find a comfortable way of working. That’s the tip or trick: Don’t follow somebody else’s workflow like the holy book. Just explore and find your own. That is the key!

Occasionally, you may not be able to follow your own preferred workflow because of specific procedures, and that *is* a problem! When I was working on the CG film *Planet 51*, the director did not like thumbnails and only allowed us to shoot video reference of our acting and then block the poses out of it – a disguised rotoscoping, if you ask me! He wanted to see blocking animation made in curves, not steps. We were forced to abide by that procedure or workflow, which can impede your creativity if you are not familiar with it. Again, I don’t believe in a set workflow, *per se*. Another funny thing from the beginning of my career is that I used to force myself to do my first rough drawing in blue, the second in red and the third tie-down in black. I can’t remember who told me that this was the rule for animators. I was naive and I adhered to it for many years, but when I finally gave up, it was such a relief to me to draw with whatever color I wanted! The results were obviously far better, as if you could feel my sense of freedom or comfort, unlike the stiff type of animation I produced when my hands were tied by a “specific procedure.” But I’m getting ahead of myself here; let’s see what procedures I follow for a regular scene.

#### C/ MENTAL PLANNING

Thinking where the character fits in the story, searching for the appropriate acting or action choices.

#### D/ PRACTICAL PLANNING

Drawing thumbnails if I feel like I might need them because of the action; record myself or a friend on tape, depending on whether the scene is a very complex mix of acting and action.

#### E/ DRAWING OR POSING ON THE COMPUTER

It depends on the scene and on how many steps lead up to it. Usually I do a couple of roughs and then I start refining the animation.

#### F/ APPROPRIATE ACTING CHOICES

It depends on how good an actor you are and on your common sense! In my case, sometimes I have a very clear idea of what I want to do and I go for it; other times, **I force myself to try different acting choices until I settle for the best option.** But this can lead you to the weakest or worst options just because it was the first thing that came to your mind! Now this is where your common sense and acting skills come into play. If the acting pops into your head like lightning, don’t underestimate your passion and heart: give your first option a chance! I say this because there is a kind of rule out there that says not to credit the first thing that comes into your head. Well, sometimes your first idea is the best option, and you need to find that out. If it suits the scene, use it! Albert Einstein used to say “If the idea is not crazy enough at the beginning, then there is no hope for it.” I like this quote because for me the meaning is that if you think too much about something or about an idea, then you probably are taking away its spontaneity or discarding it for something – let’s say – more reasonable.

If I’m not sure what choice is better for the scene, I talk it over with colleagues and get their feedback before I decide which option is best for the acting. Sometimes, I do a quick rough of the scene and show it to people who have nothing to do with the animation business, like family or friends. Their comments are usually accurate. As outsiders to the animation field, they can identify the exact feelings generated by the movements on screen, so having them look at your rough can be of great assistance. After all, our work is meant for them, the audience, not for the colleague animator sitting next to you. As such, we have to be able to communicate with them; they are the ones who are supposed to see it, feel it and enjoy it.

Besides, if you’re working with an animation director or supervisor, you can rely on him for feedback and guidance in making your choices. This aspect of your work will vary with how much time you spend working on the production. When you first enter a production, you spend more time searching for the appropriate acting than you do when you have been working on the movie for eight months. **From personal experience, I can tell you an animator needs almost six months to accurately touch on the character’s feelings!**

#### G/ VISUALIZE THE SCENE IN YOUR HEAD

Once I have figured out how the character should feel, or better yet, how the character does feel about what is happening, what follows is usually the search for the appropriate acting. For me, it’s almost a philosophical discussion with myself. I consider the character’s feelings and how they will create specific reactions in the audience. I always try to find the precious subtext in the action; after all, we have to make them feel and react through our acting “puppets.” At times, I put on some inspiring music or go down to a bar with my sketchbook and enjoy a big coffee and a cigarette (you can still smoke in some bars in Spain) – whatever it takes to stimulate my creativity. And with some luck and patience, I eventually end up with some juicy choices for the acting, followed by the selective process.

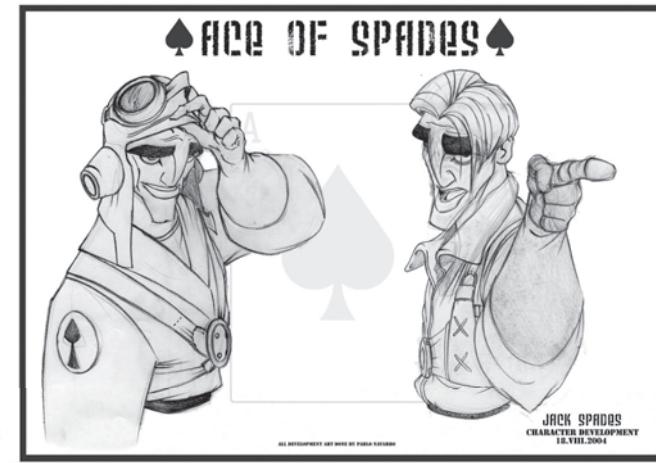
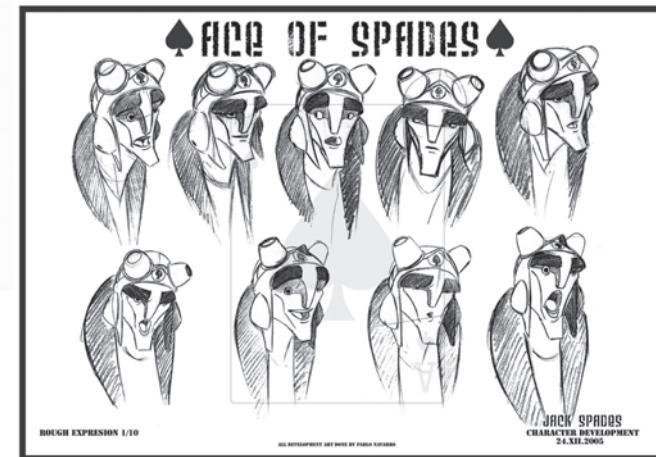
## H/ POLISHING

Over time, I have discovered that the best animation is in scenes you look back on at the end and can't tell how you did it. Where you can't differentiate between drawings or digital poses that were keys or breakdowns or even inbetweens. This is something that happens to me quite often due to the mix of methods I use to animate, again using whatever makes me comfortable as a tool to achieve my goal. It's the best method. I'll try to describe how I animate and polish a scene so you can see what I mean!

I do a rough animation or blocking, a very rough one, doing pose-to-pose for the main keys that I have in mind. I play it and if it works, then I pick up those keys and add some breakdowns. In the "adding breakdowns process," I switch to "straight ahead"; doing this means for sure that I'll have to rework or redraw some keys. After adding the breakdowns on the whole scene, it becomes a mix of pose-to-pose and straight ahead animation. The advantage of this is that you have the accuracy of the pose-to-pose method, and the fresh and lively look of the straight ahead. During this process, I change the timing a bit and I reposition keys and breakdowns in the scene. When I'm happy with the final result, then I add the main inbetweens and, again, I change breakdowns and keys where I have to in order to make an arc of movement more fluid or harder. To polish the scene even more, I leave all the moving holds for the end; those are difficult parts of the animation. A moving hold has to really be well executed by achieving the least movement possible yet without having a "dead character" on screen! Maybe the most difficult parts of moving holds are how you go into one and how you come out of it. You have to make it look effortless. You'll achieve spontaneity if you really know the mechanics of the movement you're working on.

Usually for subtle acting actions, I go in straight ahead. For instance, if you have a head nod or a similar gesture to complete, you have to draw or pose six different keys in eight or sixteen frames; that's something you can only achieve with straight ahead animation. The result is that by mixing these two animation methods well and wisely, you can achieve the best in a particular scene. With time, experience and training, you will usually be able to tell what other animators have used to complete a scene with your bare eyes, which means you have learned and mastered your skills. But sometimes you will encounter a scene where you can't tell what was used; these are the scenes that have been perfected so well that every single frame is a masterpiece of timing and movement. These are obviously the best ones.

Fortunately, I was not born knowing it all and I still make many mistakes. Having a "repertoire of mistakes" allows you to use them as a tool to achieve interesting things in animation. I mean, not having a fluid polished arc of movement is a mistake, for example, but sometimes having a shaky (not so fluid) arc may express something. So get to know the animation mistakes and use them to your own advantage. I remember the nine old men saying that you should never break an arc in animation even though, in real life, we break arcs all the time. Conclusion: know the basics so you know when and where you can break the rules. Many of the subtleties I do in my scenes come from mistakes I've made in the past.





THE MOST  
IMPORTANT THING  
IN ANIMATION IS  
THE AUDIENCE'S  
ABILITY TO FEEL  
AND SEE WHAT  
THE CHARACTER  
IS THINKING  
AND DOING.  
IN ORDER TO MAKE  
A CHARACTER  
ACT AND SHOW  
EMOTIONS, I FOLLOW  
A PROCEDURE  
THAT'S CALLED  
"PHRASING"

Another thing is to plan the timing and spacing of the drawing or digitally generated poses very carefully. To achieve this, you have to do a lot of keys and breakdowns. Some animators who work more with the pose-to-pose method sometimes complain afterwards that the clean up artist or the inbetweener (or the computer or the curves editor!!) messed up their animation. That is absolutely not true: if they had checked the movement spacing, then they would see the odd speeds and "jumps" in the pace of the movement. If the inbetweener follows the timing charts, there is no one to blame but the animator's lack of vision on that subject.

#### I/ EMOTION

The most important thing in animation is the audience's ability to feel and see what the character is thinking and doing. In order to make a character act and show emotions, I follow a procedure that's called "phrasing" – or at least I know it by that name. Phrasing consists of taking the dialogue, writing it down on paper, and then trying to discover where the accents are. The phrasing gives you the pace of the acting, and most important of all, it indicates how many gestures you can fit into the dialogue. It's quite difficult to explain with words and without a practical example with sound; I hope you get the idea. You can do a bit of "phrasing" even without dialogue by writing the character's feelings instead. When the scene does not involve a conversation, but pantomime, or silent acting, I use some simple and helpful rules about acting itself to show the emotions.

**The first rule is that every emotion or action is the result of or the reaction to a mental process;** for example, if a character goes to pick up a glass of water, then he should be thirsty first. So it starts out as a thought or an emotion and then he acts on it. This is very important because if you recognize that the character needs to think and then act, you won't have a scene where he is gesturing for no reason. Unfortunately, it is a common mistake in animation to have over-acted scenes where the character is moving the head and the arms and going from one state of mind to the next in just six frames. It could be entertaining because of all the movements and but not because of the feelings portrayed or displayed. Obviously, if you succeed in communicating the character's thoughts and feelings, that is credibility. Here are some rules that I've learned from the writings of the old Disney guys:

First, if you have a character switching between moods, let's say from happy to angry, then ensure that you show the transition when the character is not moving around to allow the audience to see it. Otherwise, you will confuse them and they won't see that change in the state of mind.

Second, if you are aiming for facial acting, don't move the character's head like crazy just so he's doing something. **Remember, the purpose of the scene is to relay his thinking and not your ability to draw a head from every perspective.**

To conclude, carefully plan the actions and the number of gestures you will put into the scene; the gestures and the actions should accurately describe the character's mood. Keep in mind the number of frames for those gestures. If you have a scene with eight seconds of dialogue acting, then you can't have eight or more different gestures, since it will be too hard to comprehend. Evidently, having paper and pencils is handy for planning it all, if not for drawing thumbnails, then to write notes about the gestures involved.

#### J/ REFERENCE

I use two different methods of acting: one based on my own life experiences and another one based on what I have observed from life and fiction. With respect to acting, I act out the action that I want and I make little reminder sketches while doing so. I usually record my acting or a friend's acting on camera if the scene is a really complex mix of acting and actions. I think recording a friend is the best way to guide or direct the actor to achieve a specific sequence; this is ultimately very useful to determine whether or not you know what you want! On the other hand, if you are doing the acting yourself, you will never know for sure whether it is good, since you're improvising rather than going for something certain. When I have something recorded on camera, I never do a rotoscoping – never! I get the video and I go frame by frame searching for key poses; I sketch the poses in my scrapbook and make notes on the sketches, notes like "hip goes right, changing balance of the body preparing to move back"; by doing this you're literally studying the movement and the action. Once I have the whole thing sketched up and the main keys have been chosen I erase the video and never see it again. I mainly rely on my notes and my memory; I always get something unique and natural.

As I said, the two methods I use come from my life experiences and my personal observation of life and fiction. With observation, you build up a "mental acting library" that could go from a girl brushing the hair out of her face in a park to the look of a kid receiving a toy he didn't like for Christmas. Observation is the key. A mental library is a perfect way of selecting acting choices too! Here are some related comments.

Observation in real life is great; you have to use your head to remember and store the information! Fiction references are good too, but you have to be careful – you have to treat them as if they were live. What I mean is that if you watch a movie and you find a sequence that you like, then you must study how it was achieved and not copy it from the screen. You don't want someone watching your scene and saying, "That character reminds me of Robert De Niro in *Casino*!" Instead of copying, try finding something suitable for your character. To pursue my goal of training my eye in animation and keeping my mental library fresh and up-to-date, I watch an animated film every day.

Using your own life experiences is also a good method, even though it is challenging, too. I remember a sequence that I had to do in the movie *Nocturna* (spoiler alert!!!) where I used my own life experience. In the sequence, the main character (Cat Shepherd) has a farewell conversation with his little friend (Tim) just before he dies, and I used the last goodbye conversation I had with my father before he died. The situation was similar and I didn't use the acting or the words, only the feelings. I knew how the kid and the Cat Shepherd felt about each other in that particular moment, and I spent a long time recovering from that cathartic yet traumatic experience. I remember once talking with Sergio Pablos about the time and effort it takes to master animation and drawing skills, and he said something really interesting:

**"IT'S TRUE THAT THE MORE TIME YOU SPEND DRAW-ING OR ANIMATING, THE BETTER YOU BECOME, BUT THINK ABOUT THIS: IF YOU SPEND ALL YOUR TIME CLOSED IN A ROOM WITH YOUR DESK (OR COMPUTER), THEN WHEN DO YOU LIVE? THAT'S IMPORTANT BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T HAVE LIFE EXPERIENCES, WHAT WILL YOU BE RELATING IN YOUR ANIMATIONS? YOU DON'T HAVE THE FUEL TO MAKE THEM WORK!"**

A very accurate thought: if you don't live, then you'll have nothing to communicate!

## K/ STUDY

Yes, I have studied a lot of movies and actors. I love the way Jack Nicholson acts. He's got a very animated way of acting; it is a mix between theater acting and cinema acting, and sometimes he bolsters his acting with priceless facial gestures. But like I said before, I just watch and take notes. Then, back at my desk or computer, I try to remember and remake those gestures on my own. In my opinion, that's the best way. I watch one animated feature film every day to keep my eyes and mind ready to see and think in terms of animation. It's an unconscious way of learning and assimilating information for future scenes you have to do. In addition, I love theater plays: what you learn from a play is quite different from a movie. Indeed, stage acting is more pantomimed, and best of all, you can take a master class in staging and play watching – it truly is the best three-dimensional experience ever!

I mean, you have to compose the set and the disposition of the actors on stage (like a painter in a picture or an illustrator) so that the viewer or audience is watching what you want them to watch. That is staging: using the resources you have to draw attention to a specific moment or sequence. Often in animated feature films, the scene layout (staging) is planned wrong, so even if you have created a nice piece of acting for it, the staging and composition of the scene diverts the audience's focus to a different place on the screen. This means your work was all for nothing, since no one is looking at that specific spot on the screen. Therefore, theater plays are an enormous source of knowledge – I mean good plays, of course!

I would like to make a distinction between the references and styles of animation you can use for different media. When you go to see a traditional 2D movie, your mind as a spectator is prepared to see something that's not real, a world drawn by people, a world created by icons: the characters' eyes are icons that we can identify as eyes, mouths are lines in the faces and so on. Here, the style of animation can be more pantomimed, more "over-acted," like in theater. In fact, you have to do this for the audience to understand that they are not watching real people but icons on the screen. In CG animation, on the other hand, the audience is watching another type of icon, one with texture and

rim lights and volume which make it more realistic than abstract. The viewer has to recognize subtleties that are greater than they would be in a more iconic, traditional 2D world.

**This is called "abstraction of reality," the ability to make the audience believe in something that is unreal.** Had they not expected to watch an imaginary story, the animation would not work. If you, as an animator, do not expect your drawing to come to life on the screen, you will never be able to make this happen. Furthermore, you cannot prepare your viewer for an abstraction of reality and then deliver something different; it just ruins the believability. It is as if you were watching a movie with a submarine in it and all of sudden you can see the strings of the scaled submarine model! The result is that you don't care anymore about the sailors about to drown because you've seen a couple of strings!

This abstraction of reality is really interesting. For example, if people are watching an action movie like *Die Hard* and the character falls from a ten-storey building to the ground and then stands up, dusts himself off, picks up his gun and starts chasing the bad guys, then the viewers won't believe it! They may even walk out on the movie because they have lost interest; it was just too incredible to be done by a man without socks! But if the same thing happened in a Spiderman movie, they will accept it and even like it. Why? First, because Spiderman has socks; second, he is a superhero with unnatural superpowers and he can stay alive after falling from such incredible heights. All of that is created by your own abstraction of reality. Your head as a spectator doesn't question Spiderman's fall because you were psychologically prepared to see or accept it.

As such, the abstraction of reality in a traditional 2D movie is different from a live-action feature, and also different from a CG 3D movie. In CG movies, you have characters that are not as iconic as 2D characters, due to many reasons such as renders, lighting and textures. You are still dealing with traditional puppets or caricatures, but they look disturbingly real. As such, in a CG movie, the acting and the action have to be more subtle, more accurate, because of the realism. At the

risk of repeating myself, even if the characters are really fantastic and caricatured, the impression is that you are watching “real” things and not icons. In other words, you can do a nasty stretch in a traditional character and no one will question it, but if you do it in a CG character, the audience may think it is full of holes and eventually lose interest in the story and movie altogether. You might find another example when you study live-action films searching for action or acting references. You may notice strange hand gestures or distorted faces, “deformed” by movement and gravity. Yet, the viewer perceives these things as real and doesn’t raise the question because the mind accepts it as such. On the contrary, if weird hand movements or misshapen faces show up in animation, the animator has ruined the reality abstraction and distract-ed the spectators from the subject matter – and we don’t want that!

To sum it up, I always keep in mind these differences when seeking inspirational acting. Traditional 2D animation is somewhere between theater and live action, maybe closer to theater, with more flexibility for riskier actions. In contrast, CG animation is also between theater and live action, but closer to live action. There is no room here for the audience to doubt the “reality” of the characters.

#### L/ PLANNING VS. ANIMATING

The time spent planning versus animating depends on the scene itself and its complexity. Sometimes it is a 10-90 split; at others, it is the opposite. I usually spend a day or two planning and then I start the animation. I might spend another day planning in the middle of the scene to get all the subtleties. **One thing for sure in my case, is that if I spend too much time planning and being obsessed with it, then the result won’t be good, since by the time I start animating I am tired of the scene already. Some things you can’t plan, or at least I can’t, from the beginning. I only do so when I have a rough “blocking” animation.**

#### M/ KEY IDEAS OR PHILOSOPHIES

I have learned plenty of philosophies over the years. Among the most relevant is the process of phrasing the dialogue and the actions in an acting scene. **This is how I achieve convincing acting; my life changed when I discovered this method** – I mean my professional life, of course!

Another philosophy of mine is to never fall in love with a key; I mean, if I do a drawing or a pose on the computer that I really love but that does not fit in the action, then I must remove it no matter how painful it may be. In some instances, you may like a favorite key even though it ruins the action, and if you insist on forcing the movement to fit it, the result is so “unnatural” that it entirely sabotages the believability of the movie. This is a very complicated problem; it’s important to remove a key that can be as harmful to the scene as bad timing. I’ve seen scenes in top movies, done by top animators, where the whole action is driven to a particular key that doesn’t fit the action. And if you notice it in a scene, that is not a good scene. In my opinion, it happens a lot in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Glenn Keane is a wonderful animator, but sometimes the “live drawing” poses he uses in his scenes make them look a bit...unnatural. Take a close look at the beast in that movie! It has happened to me many times and is still happening, even though I try my best to keep a sharp eye and mind to avoid it.

One of my other routine approaches is the “feeling with your own flesh” technique. What do I mean by this? Well, allow me to explain. I realized one day that I could animate a character walking, running, or doing any common “everyday” activity, but that when it comes to animating specific actions, it was difficult. You may find yourself animating certain actions you had never done personally, so when your references are in vain, what can you do? Let me clarify. For instance, in the feature film *El Cid, the Legend*, there were many Middle Age sword-fighting sequences and never in my life have I used a sword. I researched extensively and despite finding plenty of illustrative videos, something wasn’t right for me; I studied the movement and mechanics, yet the feeling for the animation wasn’t right. I eventually came across an antique manual of fifteenth century sword fighting by a sword master called Talhoffer, a German guy, I think. I read it and we crafted a couple of wooden swords, not too heavy and not too light, and for a couple of months my partner and I used them to practice based on the fighting techniques described in the manual and on the videos. By the end, we experienced the fighting with “our own flesh” – what it was like handling a sword as a weapon, and best of all, knowing how it changes the feeling in your mind when it is hanging from your side. We could understand every body movement in a sword fight: body balance, anticipation, energy recovery after a strike, and so on, in the same way we understand a walk or run cycle because we do it all the time and our body “feels it” daily. This allowed us to supervise the action scenes and check on the choreographic procedures. Similarly, I had to animate a guy being thrown over another guy’s back in a fight. I planned the scene and roughed it so

many times, yet I couldn't get the right weight and body gesture on the fall. I reckoned that I was wondering how it should be instead of knowing how it is. So one day, tired of getting nowhere with my rough animation, I stood on top of a table and jumped to the ground to experience and feel the movement. The outcome was a painful shoulder injury and a complete understanding of the whole action. It's a quite extreme example. Kids, don't do this at home...or at least be smarter than me and put a mattress on the floor! Bottom line: if you can physically experience a movement with your own body, you will create the best animation for it.

Finally, another technique I use and keep in mind is that animation is all about teamwork. You have to be a good teammate so that all of the artists, including yourself, can make the most of it for the sake of the movie. **Strong egos and personality issues are to be avoided.** **About favorite keys: if a director or supervisor asks you to remove a specific key, even one you love, you have to control your ego and abide by his directives since he may have a valid external perspective of your work.** Should you have a different opinion on the subject, try to express it in a constructive way. After all, all the artists in the team are working for the best of the movie. Needless to say, the director has to control his ego and convey his ideas in a constructive way, too! Cooperation and team spirit should apply to all parties, not only the animators! Consequently, ego fights break the team and the result is inconsistency in the quality of the movie. Ego is a tool humans exploit to survive in this world, but in excess it is harmful. A good friend of mine and I would always come up with an exercise to control our egos. We would spend an entire day drawing in the zoo or in the live drawing classes, and at the end of the session, we would choose each other's best drawing...and burn it. It was very heart-wrenching but it makes you comprehend that the paper is gone, but the drawing is still inside of you and will remain there.

## YOU HAVE TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER LIKE THE PALM OF YOUR HAND...

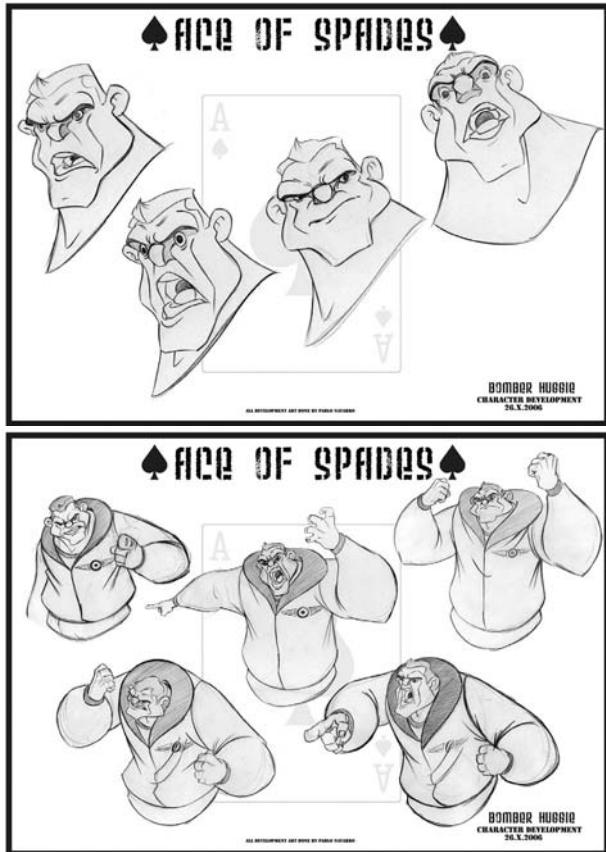
### N/ BELIEVABILITY

In order to achieve believability, you have to know your character like the palm of your hand and apply the previously explained tricks and techniques to make the acting and movement natural and, ultimately, believable. Most importantly, the character's acting must be genuine and sincere to accomplish the credibility. What do I mean by sincere? Well, you ought to think like the character, and not make the character think like you. This may be difficult at times, especially when your character has an absolutely different perspective on things. Maybe the most challenging character to do for a male animator would be a female one. He would be required to animate his perception of what she may be or think, not necessarily what she is in real life. I guess that would be the hardest. I personally have never had the chance to animate a female character, and if I ever do in the future, it will certainly be a tough introspective social quest to "consciously" become something I'm not!

If you find yourself in similar plight, here are some helpful tips. For instance, let's assume that if you notice somebody accidentally dropping his wallet on the street, you will pick it up and run to give it back to him. Now all of a sudden you are required to animate a character who is a heartless thief doing exactly the opposite: running away with it or pick-pocketing another person. How will you do it? Your moral beliefs and ethics are certainly not allowed to interfere in the scene, nor can your character display any hesitation or second thoughts while stealing. You have to be and think like a bandit in that scene. In other words, you have to identify the aspect of the action that bothers you and animate exactly that, since it will be more suited to and reflective of the character's persona.

In brief, in order to animate the most credible and believable character, **you have to be able to identify with the character**, not the other way around. A tough task, but that's how acting works.

## NEVER GIVE UP AN IDEA BASED ON THE DIFFICULTIES YOU MAY FACE



ACE OF SPADES – BOMBERHUGGIE DEVELOPMENT

### 0/ ENCOUNTERED PROBLEMS – WORKFLOW

I have faced many challenges throughout my career. At the beginning of my professional life, I didn't have enough drawing skills to complete certain actions or acting in a scene. Once I more or less mastered the drawing issue, another hurdle came into play: the technique. Mastering the art of animation requires meticulous procedures and rules. Then, when these impediments are overcome, another problem and another one and another one will arise, until the ultimate challenge materializes: fighting with your mind. In the planning process, your head is burgeoning with ideas and the goal is not to settle for the easiest one but for the one best suited for your character. Allow me to expand on this philosophically. The best way to go from point A to point B in life is a straight line. Under normal circumstances, for example, an electrical current will follow the path with the least resistance, and similarly, if you intend to go to a friend's house, you will Google the address and take the shortest drive! We live by this rule and will probably continue to!

But in art and animation, the quest for excellence takes you unquestionably through the roughest and most difficult paths, not the shortest! The better it looks, the harder it was to achieve, yet strangely enough we are unconsciously governed by this rule. It's part of our nature! So when it comes to researching your character's best acting options, you have to battle with your inner self to avoid easy options! In this regard, I would like to mention my experience in *Nocturna*. By then I had been in the field for 10 years. I was 29 years old and I had the chance to work with Julien Bizat, a 21-year-old Frenchman. We were developing the characters for the movie, and he was in charge of all the designs and we both were responsible for testing and developing their movements. I must say he is a genius (and a really good friend!) for his uncanny ability to animate whatever comes to his mind. There are just no limitations to his capabilities. During the course of our collaboration, I was amazed by his work, so skillful at such a young age. That feature film was his first.

When we were together, we often discussed our results, and one day I was struggling with an acting scene and asked him for feedback. He glanced at it and said, "Pablo, it works but I know you can improve it because right now anyone can achieve this." Then he continued: "Was this the only option for the scene or did you have other acting choices I did not see?" As a matter of fact I did, so I explained them to him and he exclaimed "Why aren't you using those? They're great!" Sadly, I realized that I was not exploring those options because they were just too hard to achieve. For Julien, nothing is difficult. Everything he thinks of goes straight into the animation, like a "Mozart" of animation. In most cases, his first rough is a masterpiece of timing and acting. How could I expect him to understand that, for me, achieving something outstanding was a hard challenge with all sorts of limitations? Following our friendly discussion about possibilities and impossibilities, I could see that it was all crystal clear to him, while I had to think hard to keep up with his meaning! Geniuses are like that, I guess; they can effortlessly express their art and don't comprehend the effort we have to make.

For me, it was a big step forward to work with someone who wasn't intimidated by the complexity of a scene. It actually taught me a lesson; never give up an idea based on the difficulties you may face. You will benefit from the knowledge you gather as you exert the effort to achieve it, and that is a reward in itself. So, thanks Julien "Frenchie" Bizat for teaching this animator (me!) a big lesson, thank you! I am constantly battling my inner self to stop backing down in front of a problematic scene and setting limitations on my abilities in the process.

## P/ MANY WORKFLOWS

On feature films, due to the flexibility of the deadlines, I allow myself to experiment more to achieve the best result. For TV movies, series or commercials, I use all the knowledge gained from my professional experience and apply it to animation. I get good results in shorter times. It is undeniable that over the years, you pick up “formulas” and tricks that guarantee good results, not necessarily exceptional animations. But deadlines need to be met, so it is convenient to fall back on extensive work experience.

## Q/ LIMITS

If the question is about limits, there are none to my procedures. I do everything I feel comfortable with to achieve what I want in the scene. As I said, I jumped off the table to visualize what should happen in the scene, injuring my shoulder in the process. So, definitely no limits!

On the other hand, if the question is about limitations, I have to admit that I have many. That is the nature of animation; it is a never-ending learning experience. By acknowledging my limitations, I am always seeking to gain more knowledge and improve my craft.

## R/ WORKFLOW OVER TIME

My workflow and procedures are changing with time, as I gain experience and master different techniques. Early in my career, I tried different things to achieve acting and actions, and later on with expanding experience, I got to know, more or less, which things would work, so I no longer bothered to try the useless techniques. **Let's say that now the workflow is more enjoyable because I tend to accomplish things with far more ease than before. Once you master the rules of animation, the struggle to complete certain actions becomes less taxing.** So the workflow will inevitably continue to change for the better. I guess that's logical.

## S/ CAT SHEPHERD

I want to talk about the most recent characters I worked on: the Cat Shepherd and the pack of cats for the feature film *Nocturna*. It really was a difficult character because of its massive design. The anatomy was very complex. Although the directors requested that it have a certain anatomy, they still insisted on the “puppet full of stuffing” feel. Needless to say, for a creature that was supposed to walk and run on four legs, that was a challenge! These were the guidelines: an agile character with a not-so-agile body. Personality-wise, he was a workaholic, overzealous with the motto “a job well done,” yet without any nerve to stand up. It was an interesting character; his job was to shepherd a pack of cats. Each cat was assigned a kid and used its “meows” to put the child to sleep. The main cat of the pack was assigned to me, too, as a character to develop, along with the rest of them, and this particular cat was narcoleptic. He couldn't carry out his job, putting Tim (his assigned child) to sleep, because he himself constantly fell asleep as a result of his medical condition. Fascinating characters!

In order to deliver the movement of the Cat Shepherd character, I studied animal movement a lot, and initially came up with the body characteristics of a gorilla, which the directors rejected. Then I went on exploring the lion, the king of the felines, based on the fact that Shepherd would be leading a pack of felines. Ultimately, I ended up using the lion's movements and behaviors whenever the character was walking on all four legs, in addition to typical bear's movements, since he could also stand on two legs for short periods of time. He could also do acrobatics on the roofs of the *Nocturna* town, so I filtered in a bit of gorilla behavior and movement as well.

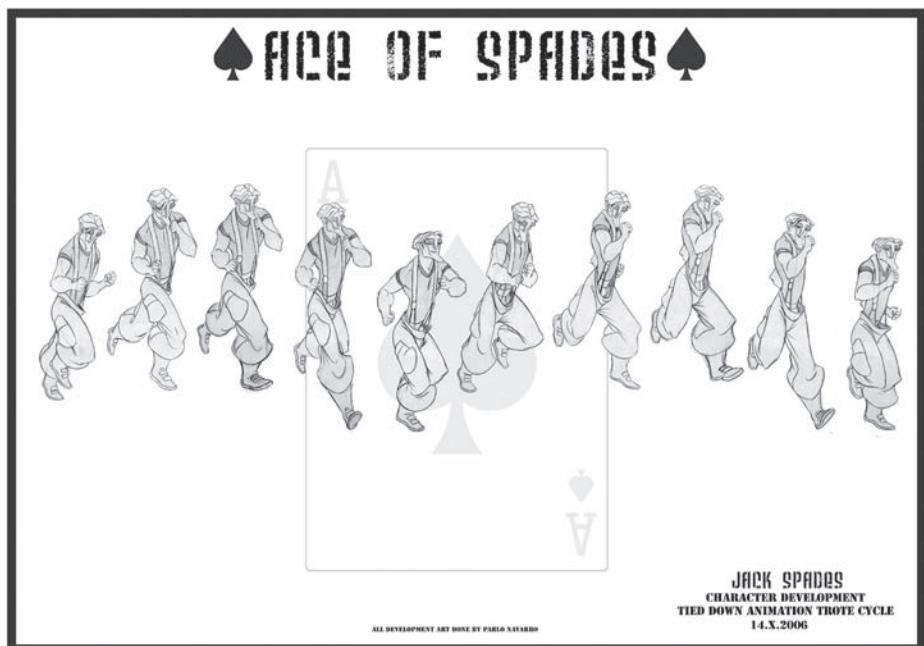
As for the cats, I had a friend with many cats, so I spent a couple of days over at her house with my sketchbook taking notes and movement sketches of her lovely pets. I developed many movement model charts with those sketches so that the animators would know what to aim for when they got to the scenes with the cats' movements. Furthermore, I made a ton of walking, running and movement cycle tests for the Cat Shepherd and the other cats, and another ton of acting tests and reactions to the different situations to develop the characters' personalities. All these tests were given to the studios later and animators as a supporting reference for the characters. The workflow for these characters was extensive time spent on research and coming up with the appropriate direction to take, based on the information obtained through animation tests.

## T/ APPROACHING A NEW CHARACTER

When I am given a new character, I first read the script a couple of times, maybe more. Then I try to figure out his personality and see how it compares to mine. I study it as if I was being introduced to a new person and trying to determine whether we shared common interests and whether we would get along. When I know his real personality, then I start the process of identifying with him psychologically: I become him, I think like him, I talk like he's supposed to talk, etc. My bathroom mirror becomes my stage now, a set for a daily morning monologue to get into character... crazy but true! I try to get to know the character really well. That's how I prepare a new character. In one of the previous sections, I expanded more on the steps to take in order to become a character through different acting methods.

## U/ LESSONS

Well, there are many lessons I have learned over the years, and I hope I will learn many more! Although I can name many lessons found in animation books, I will deliberate on the ones I encountered daily while working in this marvelous world of animation! As for the others, just open your copy of *The Illusion of Life*. Here are some of these lessons.



ACE OF SPADES – JACK DEVELOPMENT

First, learn the basics and principles of animation. This allows you to develop your own style and techniques. It will also speed up your work and lend it unique results. You must know how to achieve things and then learn where and when to bend these principles and rules whenever appropriate. **Never underestimate the value of doing a bouncing ball test once in a while!**

Another lesson for me was to understand the two main methods of animation: straight ahead and pose-to-pose. Once I grasped them really well, I was able to mix them to get the best of each in my animation.

Obviously, acting was among the things I learned. Gaining knowledge of all the things that make acting believable: from my own mental process to developing an accurate acting choice, to the dialogue “phrasing” to the proper distribution of gestures in a dialogue acting scene.

**The ability to recognize and acknowledge my “mistakes”** so that I can use them as tools later on, in order to achieve something different in the scenes.

The main rule I acquired along the years is humility. Being humble allowed me to learn from other artists; if someone is better than you, then learn from him, for goodness sake! Unfortunately, some people resent the presence of a better artist. If only they knew how much they lose by keeping this attitude!

Teamwork, another big lesson, is the fundamental impetus of a good movie! **The better the teamwork, the better the quality of the animation.** This is obviously very closely related to being humble.

By being at ease with my own skills, I developed a personal method to make things work, not copying or following usual things because someone had done it before. Like I said, do not force yourself to do thumbnails if that is useless to you. Do not force yourself to follow a particular procedure. Just do what inspires you – it's as simple as that! Ultimately, that's the goal: to get inspired to achieve excellence!

# THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Thanks to Patrick, I met Reno Armanet. There's quite a funny story behind all this – some would call it destiny or the result of an artistic master plan conspiracy!

Patrick had a project, an animation book, the same one that you have in your hands right now. He's in Canada, I'm in Barcelona, and Reno is in Paris... three different, distant places, one objective. After Reno and I finish up our contribution to the book, Patrick introduces us. It happens that Reno needs an animator for his upcoming short, and it happens that I have some free time between projects, so we talk a little bit over a few emails. We see that we share common objectives and ideas, and after thirteen hours in a train, I was in Angouleme, France, ready for another artistic adventure!

HE STORES ACTIONS  
AND SITUATIONS IN HIS MIND IN  
THE BLINK OF AN EYE!  
AND WHAT MAKES THIS  
OBSERVATION ESPECIALLY  
USEFUL IS HIS UNDERSTANDING  
OF HUMAN EMOTIONS.

## A WORD ABOUT THE ARTIST

Allow me to introduce Reno to you all, so you can see how the mind and heart of an artist can influence the workflow and the final result of a project.

Reno is an out-of-this-world artist, an artist in the true sense of the word! He's an open-minded guy, open to embracing challenges, and always going for the most astonishing result, the most effective way to say what he wants through his stories. Well, sometimes this leads the artist on rough roads and through experimental fields that some animators are afraid of. Sometimes it could even seem like the dream of a mad man, but believe me when I say that when you meet a true artist, he makes you believe that while his project might seem to be madness, it will be done and it will be a great piece of art!

Of course, a draftsman like this needs someone open-minded next to him, someone who's not afraid of challenge and change. Flavie Darchen, his girlfriend, is one of those people, and then I came into the picture. In Reno's own words, "I feel like an alien in this artistic world. I can't speak my ideas openly. People tend to give you funny looks when you open your heart and tell them your projects. But with you I don't feel that. I don't feel bad talking with you. I can share my dreams...maybe you're an alien too!!"

Yes, we're both aliens if we look it that way. Nowadays, there is little room for new or artistic projects. If you don't put animals burping their ABC's in a project, well, you're a goner.

It seems that somewhere along the road we lost the essence of our art, which is to tell a story instead of selling action figures...that burp their ABCs when you press the "try me" button!

Back to Reno: he had a lot of faculties on his side. He's a great animator, and more importantly, he's incredibly observant – he stores actions and situations in his mind in the blink of an eye! And what makes this observation especially useful is his understanding of human emotions. This is the kind of guy who will ask you if you're feeling alright just because he sees something odd in your posture when you walked through the door. He is a really good draftsman, too, well balanced, with personal style, and able to show atmosphere and emotion through his designs for locations and characters.

Another of Reno's skills is music. In fact, this might be the most important of them all, because music reigns his kingdom. Reno is the only guy I know who can speak and sing at the same time... including the soundtrack!!! I don't know how he does it, but it's true!

Because of this passion for music, Reno composes for and plays several instruments, and like I say, music and rhythm reign his thoughts. This is really interesting when he's thinking about animation. A whole new approach to this art form opens in front of him and the artists who are working with him. He has a completely different way to approach a scene or sequence than I have. He approaches it through music, and I approach it through acting, storytelling, and emotion. I guess this makes us a perfect team, so we achieved things in his short film that we couldn't have if we weren't mixing together these two different ways of seeing things.

That's Reno – a dreamer of life and art, an incredible artist that I'm really proud to say I have met and worked with, plus a big extra: a good friend!

## 04

I'm going try to describe the work we did on *04*, Reno's short film, and explain the methods and innovations we developed and encountered during the process.

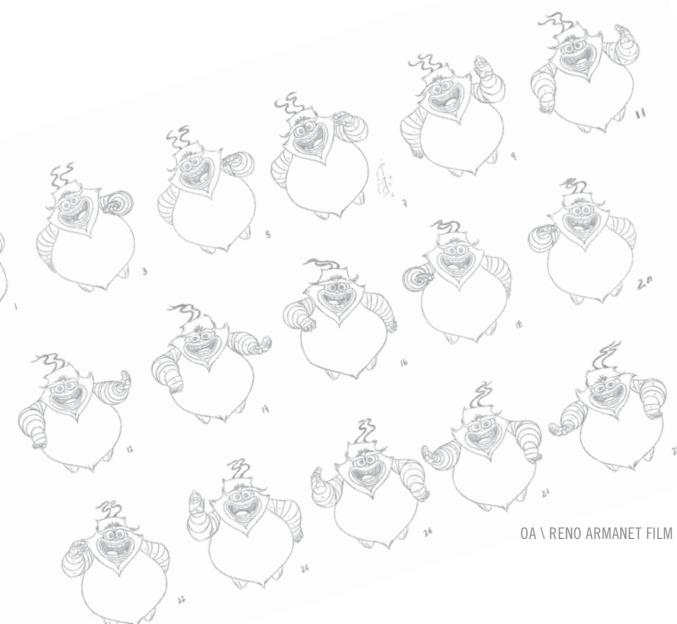
Like I say, Reno and I didn't know each other. We had just exchanged a couple of emails and some conceptual pictures he send me over to evaluate his project. At the beginning I was surprised – even shocked, I must say, by the rough, disturbing and yet appealing images he sent me. I wanted to know more about the project, so I asked for more info.

Then I got a first taste of what I would come to enjoy later on. He told me a bit about what the story was all about, and when I asked for a storyboard to evaluate the amount of work and the style, he sent me a few rough "napkin doodle" kind of sketches. He told me, "I have the story in my head. I need you to materialize the ideas. I want us to create this together, with no boundaries to our creativity. I think that developing a storyboard right now would tie our hands, so now we'll just be working with ideas and concepts!"

A regular animator would have to think really hard about this kind of proposal. If a director tells you that there is no story at all, then you know you'll be suffering a lot in a production that doesn't have a head. Imagine this situation in a commercial production: if you go to work on a feature film and the director tells the team of animators that there is no storyboard, well, something is wrong! But in this case, it was a personal short film, and there was room for exceptions. So that was the first time I found myself in a situation that "rocked my foundations." A leap of faith, if you will!

I decided to go to France to find out more about this project and see how we could work it out together. Reno and Flavie gave me a warm welcome. They were happy that I was there, and I started feeling happy to be there, too!

The next day, after recovering from my 13-hour train ride, I went to the studio early. There were Reno and Flavie. Reno speaks little English, and I speak no French, so Flavie had to translate for us. Later Reno and



04 \ RENO ARMANET FILM



04 \ RENO ARMANET FILM

I found ourselves speaking French, English, Spanish, and a bit of Catalan, and we managed quite well. But to talk about acting and emotion, well... you just have to act, so we were like a couple of crazy mimes, moving our hands a lot and making funny noises... I must say we understood each other better than with words. It was something more naked and primitive than the rhetorical blah-blah-blahing we humans are used to putting in our communications!

So little by little I discovered what the project was all about, and the style of the animation that we would need. We did a lot of thinking before going into production. I was concerned about the lack of planning, but Reno didn't seem to worry about it. His head was boiling with ideas, and that stopped him from focusing on one sequence or scene at a time, so I decided to make that my first duty: to organize the scenes and let Reno think about the emotions that he wanted to show.

We spent a few days brainstorming and we ended up with ideas for the first sequence of the short. We did a rough sketched conceptual storyboard, just a reminder of the scenes we had in mind, which might or might not change when we started producing. For an independent artist, it's hard to work with other people. When you're independent, you are comfortable working with yourself, and you allow yourself to leave things "hanging" because they are already in your head, and you know you will get to those ideas sooner or later, but in the meantime, you don't need to explain it to anyone.

But when independent movie-making is mixed with regular production, with more people involved, you need to make things a little more standard, follow some process so you can be sure that your ideas and concepts are understood and followed by the other artists. **This was the first thing we worked on together: building the foundations of the whole production so we could be “independent” from each other while we worked on different areas toward the same goal.**

The second thing I was worried about was the style. The short had five different artistic styles, each one described in different sequences within the film. For every style, I thought we should develop a different style of animation, so I start making tests and using all the knowledge I had gained from my experience, and soon we found solutions for every style in the film.

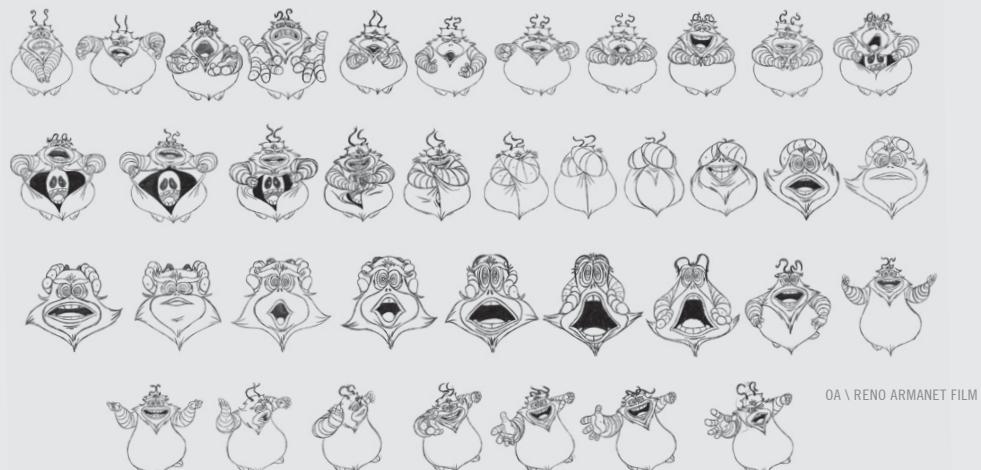
Because of the storytelling and the style, some of the sequences required us to work on 3s, some required 8s, and some others took the traditional way – plain 2s and 1s, for a beautiful full animation. And then words come into the picture – full animation!!

We didn't want to do limited animation – you know, working on 8s may seem limited – so we put our effort into making everything believable, even though we were doing crazy stuff, and the best way to achieve this was full animation. We didn't want to have fixed drawings with moving arms and stuff like that, because of the artistic style of the render. The audience would notice that, and then we would lose the believability of the scene and, by extension, the audience empathy. So we came up with what we called “**experimental full animation.**”

We used the rules and basis of full animation, but we took those rules and changed them as needed to suit the style and form. I have to say that for me, this was really new. Once again in my career I was blessed with being able to create something. I had never done experimental animation, but I had some ideas about what to use in something like Reno's short – you know, things you want to try in a production but the style and deadlines don't allow you to do it. I left behind everything I knew about making films, and I approached this project like something new, using all the trick of the trade that I had learned in fifteen years, but in a fresh, new way!

Then we started the animation. We decided that the best way to do it was with digital tools, so we got some digital drawing tablets and a cool program to do the animation. We didn't want a vectorial look, so we ignored the vectorial software programs and we used bitmap ones instead, which gave us the hand-made look we wanted.

Working digitally allowed us to work faster and more safely, saving endless “pencil test” time. We have scenes that are almost one minute long, and doing scenes like that in the traditional way – well, it would





OA \ RENO ARMANET FILM

IT WAS  
A FANTASTIC  
COMBINATION  
OF PROFESSIONAL  
EXPERIENCE  
AND FRESH  
NEW VIEWS

have taken us ages to get them right. So we applied the whole traditional process to the digital era, with outstanding results.

Thanks to the style of the animation, the simple style of the characters, and the use of these tools, I found myself animating almost one minute of full animation in a couple of weeks! I must say that the final look of the line is a roughed render, so we saved time doing a lot of tiedown, and this sped up the whole process.

The results were really good, and we were encouraged to keep on going!

Now to talk a little bit more about how Reno and I worked. Once we had the scenes planned with little sketches and doodles, Reno and I discussed the business in each scene, brainstorming the scene I was about to animate. We tossed around lots of ideas and once we were sure what we needed, I started animating. Using digital tools, as I said before, really sped up the whole process, so I was able to show Reno a complete rough idea of the scene.

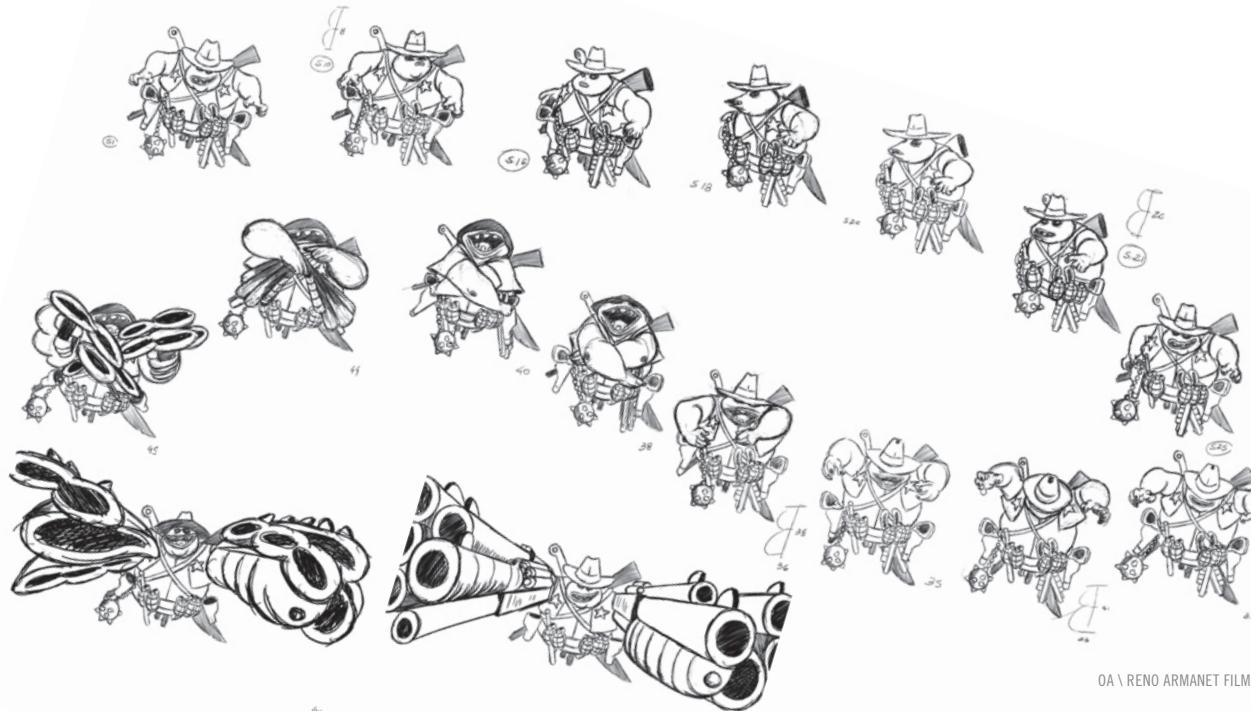
Once it was finished, we went over it again and watched the scene several times. Reno would stand quiet, staring at the screen, looking at the rough animation with a growing smile on his face as he went over and over the animation. After several minutes, he would start talking, fast and full of excitement!! “Your animation is telling me this!!” and then he would explain a new idea, based on what I had done.

It was a fantastic way to work. Of course, we didn't have a tight schedule to follow, so we could spend lots of time in this process. New things came out of the reviews we did for every scene, and everything we added made the scene better and better.

I have to say that sometimes Reno's ideas seemed quite crazy to me. I mean, he was not afraid of using “taboo” things of animation – like once he asked me to do “twining” and “symmetrical moves” on purpose. It was a good experience for me. He was asking for these “mistakes” to create a certain look and feeling he wanted to achieve, but on my own I would never have gone that way, because of the taboo of those actions – **you know, never do symmetrical movement, watch the twining in the movement. These are mistakes in animation, but Reno used this in our favor. He used them in a positive way, to tell something, to create the desired feeling in a scene. So this “rocked my foundations” again... opening me up to embrace new ideas.** You can see that in these scenes, we've done some incredible crazy stuff, yet it's appealing, believable, and full of emotion to trigger empathy!

Another funny situation that perfectly describes the healthy and creative way of working was that we were working on a sequence that was based on one of the characters of Alice in Wonderland – to be specific, the cat. It was a long, long acting scene. After I did the first rough, Reno and I reviewed the scene and found out we could bring more crazy stuff into it, so we were adding and taking out stuff from the scene. At one point, we felt like the scene needed more time in the middle of an action, because the character was standing and it needed to sit down and continue saying his dialogue, but the space we had between lines was very short, so we add more silence between these two parts of the dialogue to give us the time needed for the action to feel right.

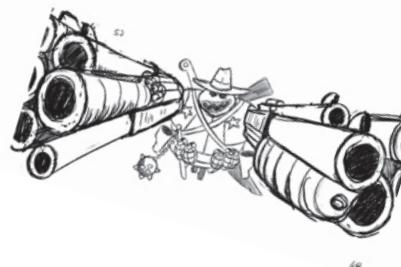
After I animated this, we found out that the action itself was “asking” for more exposure time... and we're not talking about 12 frames here. No, we needed to add like five or six seconds, so we got into a dead end. The scene was becoming boring, and it was not natural for a character



to stop talking for five or six seconds in the middle of a dialogue. I said to Reno, "If we continue adding time to this, the audience will fall asleep!"

*That was the key word for Reno's creative mind!!! He jumped off the chair and said, "That's it! If the audience feels bored with this, then the character is bored too!! So let's try to make the character fall asleep!!!"* I thought that this was sooooo crazy that it was worth a try. So I made the character fall asleep for six seconds in that part of the scene... and the result was amazing! It fits the action, and it fits the general feeling, adding a kind of complicity between character and audience.

This is a perfect example of the way we worked – the enjoyment and the freedom to test and achieve new things. It was a fantastic combination of professional experience and fresh new views, and we advanced the animation by doing it. After we saw what we achieved, we dubbed it “experimental full animation.”



JASON RYAN



# BIOGRAPHY

My name is Jason Ryan. I was a supervising animator at Walt Disney Animation Studios for almost twelve years, and I am currently a supervising animator at DreamWorks Animation Studios. I graduated from the Irish School of Animation (aka Senior College, Ballyfermot), Ireland in 1993 with a Student of the Year award from Don Bluth (creator of *An American Tail* and *The Secret of NIMH*). I started my career directly after college as a 2D animator and worked on various German feature productions. After a brief time in London, working as an animator in computer games, I was hired by Disney Animation Studios. My first project was *Fantasia 2000* (the Steadfast Tin Soldier segment). My other work included *Dinosaur* (Kron and Carnataur), animation supervisor on *Magic Lamp* (the genie from Aladdin in CG and 3D), animation supervisor on *Philharmagic* (classic Disney characters in CG and 3D), and supervising animator on *Chicken Little* (Chicken Little himself). Currently I am a supervising animator on the movie *Shrek Forever After* from DreamWorks Animation Studios and before that I supervised on *Monsters Versus Aliens*. My teaching career began at Ballyfermot Senior College in Ireland, and while working on *Chicken Little*, I was also a mentor with AnimationMentor.com.

# WORKFLOW

## THE BEGINNING

I began my career in the field of animation about fifteen years ago; I started out as a 2D animator, and my first job was actually paid by the foot. I was only remunerated for every shot that was approved which was based on the amount of seconds or footage... so I learned to work fast. Actually, I tried to get down a very fast scribble pass of my shots first and then show it to my director as a sort of blueprint. I would only spend about an hour or so on each shot. Then I would get this initial idea approved by my director before I started tying the drawings down. My actual work flow hasn't changed at all since I started in CG.

I was taught this work flow in Dublin, Ireland, by an ex-Bluth animator who was mentoring at my local Animation school. He used to say, "Don't draw it cleaned up because it's going to take you too long, and your animation will look too stiff." It's the same in life drawing. If you are going to do a long life drawing for an hour or so, first try to always get down the gesture really quickly (like, in 30 seconds), and then rub it down so that you end up with the rough proportions before tying it down. However, if for example you start with the head and you immediately polish it and clean it up, you might find that your life drawing is out of proportion and may look a bit rigid. The first pass is a sort of spontaneous pass for a foundation. In my case, I always try to get impulsive, "going with the energy" type of drawing, as if it were meant for an action shot. Then once the basic foundation is there, then I will draw in the details. I approach Animation the same way.

YOU HAVE  
TO THINK  
ABOUT WHAT  
IS INSIDE THE  
CHARACTER'S  
HEAD.

#### ACTING CHOICES

Sometimes, I act the shot out in front of a mirror. If it's an action shot or a weight lift, for instance, I might actually pick something up that is fairly heavy and then exaggerate it. This way I'm thinking naturally about the weight, the balance and the line of action that I'm going through; I begin with making little mental notes such as "my weight is over in my left leg" or "I have to shift my weight on to that side before I can release my right leg." In order to get a convincing feel in your animation, you have to observe yourself and feel the twists and turns that your body makes, like your hips, your shoulders, and your line of action through your spine and legs. For convincing acting, You have to think about what is inside the character's head. It's just not okay to think what you would feel in those situations but rather what your character would feel.

#### UNDERSTAND THE SHOT

When I'm demonstrating Animation through my Tutorials or Webinars, I think about giving my character a back story to show people how you literally get from nothing to a good idea; then you can develop on that as the character grows. I really want to think about these characters as if they were real, with feelings so I always try to give them a real situation to act in. **Some of the scenarios can be dramatic, and some of them could be joyful, but you just want to be true to that situation and emotion. When your character is true to his or her emotions, your character's performance will ooze sincerity.** Indeed, any pose you come up with will support the emotion state further. On the other hand, if you just make it up as you go along, you will start wandering, and things might not fit the emotion context of the actual shot. It will simply end up being motion for motion's sake and devoid of any purpose or feeling.

#### THUMBNAILS

My "thumbnailing" process is a habit. While searching for general ideas for shots, I might just thumbnail a couple of ideas down on one sheet of paper. But when I'm animating, I find thumbnails to not be quite as useful because they are static drawings, but if I actually animate them, then they evolve from the performance because the poses will relate to drawings coming before and after. This is where my work flow may differ from other animators. Some students may look at my work flow and say, "It looks like you are animating twice," but I would answer, "Not really, I'm just trying to animate my thumbnails full size. I'm not really drawing them «On Model», I'm just trying to draw the essence of the pose I'm thinking of as quickly as possible, like a shorthand version of my character. By drawing quickly you can be much freer to experiment with different ideas and you are less likely to become possessive over something that you've only spent twenty seconds doing. In CG, posing in Maya might take you an hour or so and what good is that if you don't even know if that pose is going to work or not. Consequently, you may have to stick to your first pass in Maya because it has taken so long. If, on the contrary, you experiment with these little stick figures and shorthand versions of your characters, you can actually enjoy the process a lot more, and come up with different ideas quite easily. In this process, you let your shots freely go forward and by the time you use Maya, you have already solved the performance for your shot. I always use the 3D software for the clean up process rather than the actual thinking and experimenting stage.

For me, the 3D process is very demanding, thinking about micro-managing every little part of the body. Thinking about rotations, translations and scales – there's nine different attributes or channels for each individual control of the body. That can be quite a daunting task for anybody, especially if they don't know what the animation will look like at the end. Therefore, I always think about the flipbook process first, which is like animating in real time with stick figures, and then I use the 3D software to refine the performance and make it even better. When I pose out in CG, using my flipbook pass as a reference, I can strengthen the poses, push them even further or make them more subtle, then if the computer inbetweens are not adequate, I can refer back to my flipbook pass and refine those too.

#### VISUALIZE THE SCENE

Let's say for an action based shot, I'm thinking about a really cool shot with a guy trying to escape from prison, for example, but he is not a confident character. He's a person who is kind of clumsy. Let's say he has to get over a wall and fall or stumble. Creating anything like that, I actually start drawing on one sheet of paper, as if it was a short comic strip, what the layout might be and where the camera might sit. I just start scribbling it out. "He could jump here and fall there, scramble a bit around here and maybe trip again... I'm not really sure." And you start thinking about little ideas like that, and what could actually happen to him as he is trying to escape. I will always start with a lot of ideas and then simplify and whittle them down to the best ideas.

#### INSPIRED PERFORMANCE FOR YOUR CHARACTER

I'm taking it from life, maybe from feature films, from live-action films or even from the reality TV. **I always like to look at real people because it's not acting. They are actually "acting normal."** I also like to look at YouTube, where people are goofing around, because they are not acting either. I like to make my animation feel like it hasn't been choreographed. To achieve that, I have different inspirational sources, but mainly live action, not really animated movies. When I animate, I always want to base it on reality, and exaggerate it further for animation. However, I would never intentionally take an acting choice from another shot just because it looks cool, I try to get my inspiration from real life observations and situations.

#### PLANNING VS. ANIMATING

If, for instance, I get a shot on Monday and I have to get it done by Friday, I spend all Monday planning it out and gathering all my reference materials by scoping around on YouTube or whatever reference videos. I maul the ideas around and then start flip booking it that Monday afternoon. On Tuesday morning, I show something to the director, and from his notes, I just take the rest of the time to block it out. I also show the directors my first blocking pass where I have the main keys capturing the essence of the shot. If he has any ideas or notes after that point, I can adjust very quickly. Afterwards, I just go in and let the performance rain down. I smooth out some edges and put in more breakdowns, favoring poses and adjusting the timing, just making the animation look good. The next stage I show to the director is actually facial expressions and final polish for the entire performance.

#### TIME

You have to schedule out your week's work and try to make sure that you're giving yourself enough time for each area. I see a lot of animators spending a lot of time on the body animation and maybe just the last day on facial, dialogue and stuff like that...that's crazy! I always give myself a fair amount of time on each aspect and I schedule it that way. **At Disney and DreamWorks, it usually averages at about eighty frames a week, which is quite steep.**

Sometimes, when you have a four-character shot and it's very physical, you might only expect to do two feet of that per week. Let's say it's a five-foot shot, with four characters, and in addition it's very physical; they might actually give you two and a half weeks or three weeks to do it.

#### CURVES

I base my workflow on what I know, which is primarily my eye. In 2D, we never really had any curves or points or anything like that, so we were constantly flipping back and forth from our previous keys to our post keys as we did the current frame.

**I also base my workflow on my flip book drawings, so that my animation is already solved.** I already know where I'm coming from and where I'm going; I just have to think about the broadest poses in the actual shot, the one pushing the rig to its limit. The broadest keys are not necessarily the extremes or the golden poses. Instead, they could be some of the breakdowns. These poses might be the ones that I want to hit first, because the computer really needs to know the range of the actions. The highest highs and the lowest lows, the biggest drags or biggest breakdowns: I start with those first. I know the results are just going to travel straight from this pose to another pose, and then I will have to do a breakdown and actually make the path of action myself.

When I used to animate in Softimage, the curves were set to spline by default and they always kind of messed me up because I wasn't aware of everything that was going to happen. I was always back tracking through all of these overshoots that the computer gave me, so I didn't feel in control at all. I was unsure of what would happen when I hit play or scrubbed through the animation.

So for my part, I always preferred to animate in linear because I knew what was going to happen, unless there was some crazy gimbal lock. In that case, I would comb through the animation, and if it was flipping around, I would go into the Euler filter to straighten it out. Ninety percent of the time the Euler Filter works pretty well.

However, I usually work it by eye, scrubbing and flipping backwards and forwards. For example, if it's a very subtle move, I make the animation work and then, when I'm getting down to the tying down stage, I go into the graph editor and hit spline to smooth out the hard edges.

I ALSO BASE MY WORKFLOW ON MY FLIP BOOK DRAWINGS, SO THAT MY ANIMATION IS ALREADY SOLVED, IN A WAY.

Then it's very easy, once it's keyed out and broken down, to go and say, "I want this to be just a little higher; this one to be a little bit lower there, etc." However, **I always found animating with the curves very difficult because there might be some counter-animations.** In other words, let's say you have a side-to-side translation on the hips and you also have a rotation; during a walk cycle, you have that side-to-side tilting hips going from your passing position to the up, to the contact and squash and those tilts may be countering where the hips are actually going. You might have to concentrate on the hip rotations and translations all together to make sure you don't erase something intentional. When I'm nearing the final stages of polish and there are a few rough edges, I just hit «spline» on everything and the computer works out all the interpolations, giving that nice slow in and slow out because at that stage my keys and breakdowns are in place, describing all the paths of actions necessary for the computer to understand where to slow in and slow out.

I enjoy controlling the computer. I like to know that my animation did not get there by accident. It's a hard thing to give up. Sometimes, I do get happy accidents and go "wow, that's kind of cool!", then I store that information into my memory banks in case I come up against a similar situation in the future.

#### TIPS AND TRICKS

The biggest thing would be not to be afraid to make mistakes and to work rough, fast and free at the beginning. When I first learned how to animate, I was confused. I learned a lot from Eric Goldberg's notes – he is an amazing animator, but he draws his poses cleaned up. He's that good! I tried to emulate that but I couldn't because my drawings took too long to get done, and as I mentioned earlier, the animation looked very stiff. An ex-Bluth animator actually showed me how to break everything down to its simplest form. If it doesn't work in the simplest form, then no amount of detail on top of that will actually make it work! **The key idea for me is to always work rough first and then, once I'm happy with the overall action or performance, then I can start tying it down.**

It only takes you about twenty seconds to draw each pose; then you are really ahead of the game. After that, it'll only take you about an hour to rough out any shot, no matter what they are, and then you can enjoy the process of discovering new things. Try different timings and spacing instead of a bag of old tricks or even worse still relying on the computer.

#### LIMIT

The only thing I wouldn't do in Flipbook is inbetweens, unless it's a very fast action where I really need to know what's happening on every single frame. So apart from that, I really don't see a limit. People usually ask "what do you do with subtle shots?" Well, I usually just try to find those golden poses in really slow acting shots where the character's not doing anything. There might be one or two golden poses as well as the breathing around them. I want to figure out how I am going to get from the first pose to the other one believably and organically. Once I have that figured out, I can really look at the CG character and sculpt the pose in CG. After that, it doesn't take me that long to find out how to bring the character to life.

#### APPROACHING A CHARACTER

In *Monsters vs. Aliens*, there were a lot of new characters. When trying to figure out the character personality, I usually try to get a shot from the movie, whether it's from the storyboard or just an idea that the director has, and try to animate it. **Generally, I don't do a walk cycle for the character unless there's absolutely nothing available and nobody has any ideas.** I really prefer animating an actual shot with dialogue. It allows me to get into the character's head and find out what style of animation we're looking for. Then I do what they call "rig wrecking" – basically it's just pushing the rig into different extreme poses to make sure that it is working properly.

There's a blob character in *Monsters vs. Aliens* named Bob. He's very cartoony, and he has the ability to metamorphose into anything. But how did they want this character to act? I animated a quick performance test shot which allowed me to figure out a lot about the rig and about how to handle the character.

In *Chicken Little*, we did a lot of acting shots with different actors voices, really just for fun but it was cool to push our character in different styles of animation performances. The first Chicken Little in the books and in the movie was actually a girl chicken. When we changed her to be boy in the movie, it changed all our animation choices from being a timid and fragile little girl chicken to being more boystrous and cartoony as the boy Chicken Little.

## POLISHING

I always scrub through my animation frame by frame to see if I'm hitting any invisible walls from the computer inbetweens. Usually, there are some flat areas where it needs to be nuanced a little bit, like when the body is coming to a stop too suddenly, when it is supposed to follow through. I also pay attention to the spacing of each limb, each hand, and each finger and try to figure out what the most fluid nuances would be to get the animation polished. In the final stages I would do a lot of playblasts to experiment with different timing ideas.

## KEEP THE IDEA

I commit myself to my ideas. I see a lot of animators who start a shot with one idea and change their mind half-way through. They re-key everything out, wasting precious time. I mean, there's nothing wrong with letting your ideas evolve, but if you change your mind to something completely different, you are back-tracking on yourself, and you risk being tied up in knots and delaying production and possibly annoying your director too.

Here is my whole workflow in a nutshell: I start scribbling my little ideas on a sheet of paper, just to come up with the first initial slots of the shots. From there, I go into the flip book and key out the whole thing just in golden poses, keys and a couple of breakdowns.

I get the idea and see how the character is in motion with very simple stick figures. Then I bring it into the 3D software as an image plane or just pile it on a separate machine where I can scrub through it and actually use it for reference. After that, I basically block out the main poses, the broadest poses first, and I let the computer give me the in-betweens. Then I can adjust those inbetween poses into breakdowns – maybe take 20 percent of this pose or 30 percent of that one – so that it gives me a pose that actually looks like the one in my flip book. I pay attention to the timing too, and the very last part of my polishing process is to tighten it up. Experimenting with the timing is an easy part of my process because I keep everything (absolutely everything!)

on every key. In other words, I don't split off timing, I don't offset timing, I do it all on the same key. If a hand needs to drag more, I look at the breakdown pose, I take the hand and I play with the spacing to drag it more towards the previous hand. This gives me more drag and follow through.

I keep the exact structure and timeline. I see so many animators – some of them are absolutely amazing – offsetting keys and still being able to manage them, but personally, I just don't know how they do it. I like to keep everything very simple.

## LEARNING ALL THE TIME

I'm always learning, in every single shot that I do. It sounds like a cliché but it is true. I always think about my shots, let them evolve, and let that dictate the kind of animation that I am going to do in the actual shot. So even if in the webinars, the shots may be based on something that I've done before that develops into something completely different. Learning wise, I always try to get the most believability in my acting. And I really think that all animators should work on this factor in order to make the audience forget that the character is animated. The audience should actually feel for the characters and be touched emotionally by their performances. I'm always blown away by some of the DreamWorks movies, like *Kung Fu Panda* for instance. Some of the shots in there were just so unbelievably simple and subtle. As animators we can so easily over animate and put everything that we have ever learned into every shot but sometimes it's just not needed.

There are some very simple shots where Po is eating cookies. It's looks literally like a held cell. He has his mouth full of cookies and he says "*Don't tell monkey.*" Oh my god, that is perfect! Po could have easily been over animated but he wasn't. In my case, I think that's probably the one area that I need to work on the most: finding places where I don't need to move the character at all. When to hold back and when to really go for it.

LEARNING-WISE,  
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IN MY ACTING.

JASON  
MARTINSEN



# BIOGRAPHY

Jason was born in Cambridge, Minnesota, and grew up in Bayfield, Wisconsin, on Lake Superior. He spent much of his childhood playing superheroes with his younger brother, as well as drawing, reading comics, and mastering video games. His childhood dream was to become a marine biologist, but after seeing the film *Jurassic Park*, his interest was refocused on animation. He was home schooled until 9<sup>th</sup> grade and in high school he started playing with 3D programs on a Macintosh platform. He was very active in sports in high school and participated in cross-country, the ski team and track. Right after high school, he took a year off to compete in a higher level in the USSA ski team in Michigan. After researching several colleges around North America, Jason decided to head to Ontario. He spent four years there learning the principles of animation and studying classical animation at Sheridan College. His student film, *MT.EHN*, won the Teletoon Most Promising Student award. After a summer learning Maya, he moved to California to work for Sony in Santa Monica, where he spent three sunny years with Naughty Dog Studios, animating characters and cinematics in the hit game series “Jak and Daxter.” In 2005, Jason moved to Blue Sky Studios in New York to work on the feature films *Ice Age 2*, *Horton Hears a Who* and *Ice Age 3*. He also became an instructor for the world-renowned Animation Mentor program. In 2008, he decided it was time for a break, so he and his best friend spent several adventurous months trekking the world. Currently, he’s animating *Planet 51* at Ilion Animation Studios in Madrid. Next he moved to Madrid, Spain, animating *Planet 51* at Ilion Animation Studios. Then he returned to L.A. and worked once again at Naughty Dog Studios, animating characters in the critically acclaimed *Uncharted 2*. Currently he is working at Double Negative in London, England.

# WORKFLOW

Prior to animating, I try to understand what is going on in the scene. First, I make sure to talk to the animation supervisor and director and know the shot’s role, the character’s personality and arc in the story. Reading the script and watching the current cut is important and can give you a feel for what is going on in the character’s head – something which is very important. The director usually knows all of this, but it is also good to talk to other animators about their interpretations of the scene and how it could be played out in your shot.

After this informative talk, I watch the storyboard and reel a bunch of times and listen to the line until it is ingrained in my head. Then I begin thinking about acting choices. Experimenting with different poses and gestures in video reference is a great way to do this. The more complicated the scene, the more planning is required. With really simple shots or takes, I can jump right into rough blocking. **Depending on the character, certain actions you can’t act out and they won’t work due to proportions or differences in body mechanics (a bird with wings instead of arms for example), so sketching and thumbnails are just as important.** And if animal locomotion is involved, research is needed to study how they move.

Then I set up the scene and figure out what is going through the character’s head. Write down the character’s feelings and thoughts (and not their words only), do reference and/or thumbnails, compose the shot, block it out, spline it and, finally, polish.

**Before animating, I compose my shot. Animators should understand how to compose and stage shots because the characters themselves should be positioned in ways to lead the eye.** Obviously, when you are working in a studio and get a shot from layout, much of this has been worked out, yet it can still be improved, sometimes greatly. The things I consider when getting a shot:

Don't stage your character straight front or sideways; have your character angled for depth and appeal.

Never cut off the character with the camera plane at joints – the ankles, the knees, the neck or the elbows. This is important to avoid a disembodied feel.

If there are two characters in a shot, when you position one character higher than the other, then it will be more dominant, and vice versa. Even slight shifts really make a difference.

Follow 'The rule of thirds': the four third points; upper left, upper right, lower left and lower right are the best locations to place the element of interest.

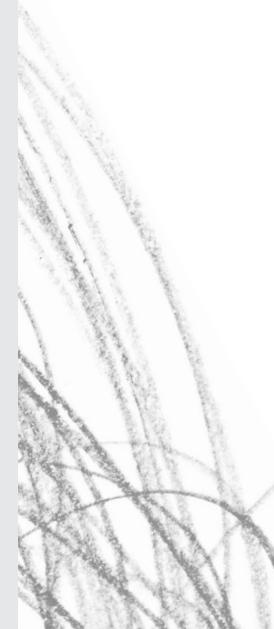
Having a character in the middle of the center or far left or right is difficult for the eye and far less appealing.

Once I get down to acting out video reference, I lock myself in the room and let the clip play for a while with padding on each end, and act it out without recording. When I feel comfortable with the line, I record for a few minutes, and then look at the footage. If I see something I like, I edit it, and if I need more, I ask others for help or keep going, taking what I liked from the first takes into the new ones. Eventually, I get a few takes I like and show them to the leads or supervisors to help narrow it down. Then, ideally, I can show a couple to the director to make sure I am on the right track. If he likes it, I start blocking. If he has minor notes, I just write them down and begin blocking with them in mind. If he thinks I'm off track, I go back to the reference room.

At this point, I can start the shot with a solid idea in mind. I find a strong key pose that really symbolizes what the character is saying and feeling, even if the pose is not exactly in my shot, and refer to it throughout my posing. Never stray too far from it emotionally, except in really strong takes or action where great contrast is needed. Emotion comes from the face, so nail it! Then let the posture and silhouette do the rest. If the character is facing away from the camera, the tilt and angle of the head say everything, with the slump of the shoulders and the tension, or lack thereof, in the hands and body.

As I said, once I get the rough blocking in, I show a few friends and the supervisor. If they like the way I am going or have a couple ideas, I often do another version to show the director at the next sweatbox. When he approves of the blocking, I refine it a bit more, with more detailed breakdowns and anticipations before moving onto splining. I often use thumbnails, mostly in action shots or with non-human characters. Scrat, for example, is hard to act out on camera, but it is easy to do quick thumbnails of his body and huge tail. I usually do them on paper for pose ideas and on 2D animation software if possible. Often, studios have proprietary software you can use to do the drawings and then import it into Maya as a background movie; it's a huge time saver and pretty fun to do. For the character Vlad in *Horton Hears a Who*, I relied a lot on 2D animation previsualization. I would animate the scene on the computer in our 2D program sketch, making rough scribbles every 2 or 3 frames to get the movement right on the flying, since flying isn't easy to accomplish with video reference. Once the director approved the overall movement, I also did the feathers this way, rotoscoped it in 3D, and started refining from there. Using this method allowed me to get a very fluid, 2D-like feel with great arcs and smooth transitions, things that made the character stand out in the film.

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When it comes to using the computer, I like to use a lot of hotkeys to streamline my process so I can delete keys, add keys, add frames, and move between keys and frames with the touch of a button. When I can unconsciously achieve these things, without thinking, it makes the animation much faster and more natural, less mechanical. I think more about the pose and the moment than about trying to move controllers around. As for animating, I use the graph editor a lot while splining, to smooth out curves and keys, but I know many animators don't. It's a personal preference.

With respect to polishing my work, after ensuring that all the major aspects are working, I start looking at what will improve the scene; adding appeal with a little asymmetry, using movers that are often ignored, verifying that there are subtle offsets everywhere, down to the eyelids on a blink, tampering with the timing, having parts of the body start and stop moving a frame or so before other parts. Sometimes it means checking arcs by watching the animation in a mirror, showing others to identify any hits or areas that need some polish, watching the lip-sync section by section to make sure the mouth is forming the word before the sound. Another thing is to insure there are no spots where everything totally freezes; even in holds, there should always be something somewhere on the body very slightly moving, breathing, eye shifts, slight settles or slow ins. Only in very cartoony animations can there be an exception to this rule. If possible, working on another shot for a day or so and coming back with a fresh eye is always good for finding the little things you need to polish.

When I started working on my first feature film, *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, in 2005, I kept my animations mostly to myself. Most of the feedback I had was from the director and supervisors only. My work only began to grow and improve when we started doing pre-development on *Horton*; I had made many more friends by then and I would stop by and see what other people were up too, what kind of ideas were floating around. The animators would get together in small groups and brainstorm fun ideas for different characters and for the movie. It was a very exciting and eye-opening time to be at Blue Sky. Everyone was forgetting about their egos and just listening to one another. When production finally started, I had a completely different way of approaching

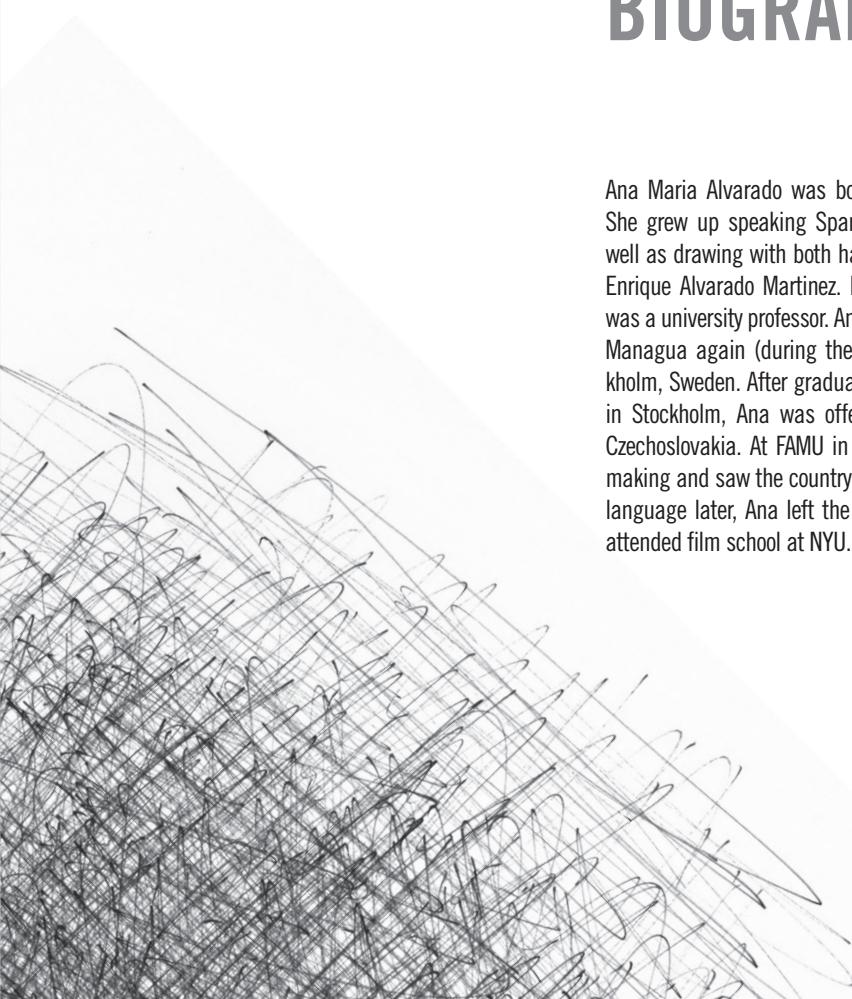
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a shot: I would get a shot kicked off, and after the supervisor or director gave his take, I would walk around to several people and ask if they had any interesting ideas for it, even *before* I started anything. Then I would do thumbnails or reference for it, often using others to help with reference. After narrowing down the reference and ideas, I would show a few animators the options to see what they liked, then the best would be shown to the director and he would add his notes.

At one point or another, I asked for advice from every person in the department. My best shots were the ones full of other people's ideas; they only got better with each person who put in their remarks. Although at the end of the day I was the one doing the work, the final result was a team effort. I was lucky that we had a great, talented team that felt like family. What's more, you don't always have to go to who you think is the "best." One of the favorite stories I've heard was about Glen Keane. When he first started at Disney, he said Ollie Johnson told him how important it was to show work or poses to others for help, and shortly after he started animating, Ollie knocked on one day on his door and asked him to help with a pose he was struggling with. Ollie set down a "perfect drawing of Penny" for him to somehow improve. Glen proceeded to, in his own opinion, mangle the drawing. Yet Ollie thanked him for his ideas and walked out. Whether or not Glen actually helped him is not the point; the point is Ollie was willing to go anywhere for assistance, even the "lowly" Glen Keane. :)

# ANA MARIA ALVAREZ





# BIOGRAPHY

Ana Maria Alvarado was born in Managua, Nicaragua, in the 70s. She grew up speaking Spanish, English and Croatian at home, as well as drawing with both hands. Her father is the Nicaraguan writer Enrique Alvarado Martinez. Her mother, of Croatian-American origin, was a university professor. Ana traveled and lived in Austin, Texas, then Managua again (during the Sandinista Revolution), and then Stockholm, Sweden. After graduating with an International Baccalaureate in Stockholm, Ana was offered a full scholarship to study film in Czechoslovakia. At FAMU in Prague, she learned the basics of filmmaking and saw the country change radically. Four years and another language later, Ana left the Czech Republic for New York where she attended film school at NYU. In 1993, Ana took her first computer ani-

mation course, back when no one really knew quite what it was. In 1997, Ana moved to LA to work at Metrolight Studios on *Kull The Conqueror*, *Poseidon's Adventure* (ride film) and *Dragonheart: A New Beginning*. In 1998, she attended Richard Williams' Animation Masterclass in NYC. In 2000, Ana joined Sony Imageworks to work on *Hollowman*, *Evolution*, *Stuart Little 2*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *The Chubb-Chubbs* (Academy award winning short), *The Polar Express*, *Peter Pan* and *Open Season*. Ana recently taught Computer Animation at Cal State Northridge and worked at Warner Bros. on The President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR) in Africa. Ana still draws, paints and illustrates, but only with her left hand.



The first shot of every project strikes me as being the most difficult. What do I do with this shot? Choices need to be made and a lot of it depends on you, the character, and the director's idea of how the character will take shape. From *Stuart Little 2* to some of the Warner Bros shorts I've worked on recently, I always think twice before committing to a course on the first shot. **The reason it's so hard to get started, beyond the fact that you're still learning about your character(s), is of course that you are dealing with an art form. There isn't one path, one way to convey what you need in your shot.** It's up to you to pick a course (one that pleases your director and animation supervisor) and execute it. This is why I love to animate. Granted, sometimes your choices get overturned and sometimes you are spoon-fed screen direction, but every now and then, you get to run with it.

I ask myself at the beginning: What is the point of the shot? Is what I'm doing conveying this point with the right tone? I either start by:

- a/ Creating a key pose that sums up the shot (drawing or posing directly with the digital puppet) or
- b/ Shooting reference: I used the mirror in the past but I noticed that some of the finer details would get lost in the process, or
- c/ Looking at all kinds of reference: other animation, movie clips, Muybridge style movement tests, random video clips. You can find almost anything on the internet these days.

Then I just continue creating key poses, particularly if it is an acting shot. When I get a shot that involves a lot of action, I work with curves right away; otherwise I prefer to plan my performance pose-to-pose. Afterwards, it is so easy to change the timing, get rid of poses that don't work, re-arrange them, etc. When I finish "posing," I seek the director's feedback on the direction the shot is taking. If you can get the director to sign off on the character's performance, you have saved yourself lots of headaches and re-do's down the road.

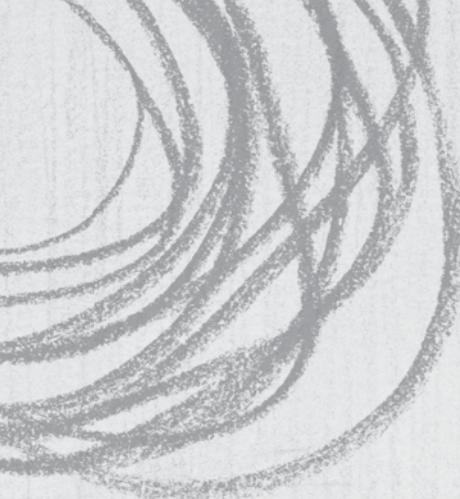
Once the key poses and timing are in place, I go through and anchor my poses. I then switch to curves and REALLY start animating. At this point, it's about figuring out how to get from A to B. Richard Williams says it's not A to B, but A to Z to B. The breakdown pose has to be a little "off," for instance (to use a much overused example), a head turning from left to right will look better if the head rotates down (or sometimes up) en route. It gets more complicated than that, but hey, that's why it's fun! After getting through the breakdowns, I try to make sure I have nice arcs, where needed, and I start working on some overlap. Any secondary animation is left to the very end, since I prefer to have the shot approved before doing any hair, ears, tails, clothing, etc.

As far as acting and how it affects the animation, it varies a lot from project to project and animator to animator. Some very talented animators I've worked with are able to act and just "turn on" a character. While working on *Dragonheart: A New Beginning*, all the animators were treated to an improv acting class, and we all had a turn trying to walk like a dragon. I hated every minute of that class – there's a reason why I thrive in the dark, behind-the-scenes cubicle world of animation.

I've heard that we all have different "learning" styles. I think mine is overwhelmingly visual. So even if I can't act to save my life, I have a few ideas on how to build a performance based on gestures and characterizations that I've seen in performances and in real life. It's really helped me to be able to draw, specifically poses that tell a story. Life-drawing is an indirect but extremely helpful way to improve animation.

My process as an animator has been very empirical. If I don't know how to animate something, but I know what it should look or even *feel* like, then I have a starting point and I just try different things until I hit on something that works. Over the years, I have found that I have to experiment less; I've now done so many walks, runs, takes, etc., that I can usually figure out what will work and what won't much quicker, particularly when it comes to timing.

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On the PEPFAR shorts at Warner Bros, one of my first shots had a dancing kid bopping around. The director wanted some very cartoony bouncing, so I visualized the character as a bouncing ball with head and arms, and proceeded to animate. It's amazing how many things you can animate once you know how to do a bouncing ball! The same goes for the whip action. I remember Richard Williams emphasizing "the whip action" back in 1998, in his masterclass. Good thing too, as I've used it on tentacles (*Poseidon's Adventure*, MCA/Universal), tails (*Stuart Little 2*), trains (*The Polar Express*) and even on a dangling Spiderman (*Spiderman 2*). A walk or a run is the easiest thing to animate, but also the most unforgiving, if it's off. The character and what he is doing determine a great deal, so I try to pose my beginning and ending, and key story points. My first shot on *Open Season* was of Boog (the bear) storming away past some bushes. It involved another character in the background, a camera move, and the tree he had to dodge. The logistics were almost as challenging as the character work. After posing, it became clear that the shot needed to be extended to accommodate the action. There simply wasn't enough time to get it all in, without making a bear move like a mouse.

One last thing about workflow: animation is a cooperative effort. It really helps to share work and ideas with your fellow animators. Some productions are under such tight schedule that most animators only get to see the screen or paper in front of them. If there's any wiggle room, though, get around and see other people's work.

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# RENO ARMAMENT



# BIOGRAPHY

My name is Reno Armanet. I'm a sketcher, animator, documentary producer and music composer. I'm an independent animator. So it touches me deeply to participate in a book like this one. I'm in here next to all these big companies that my neighbors worked with.

Thank you for the warm welcome! This book will give you a good picture of the way some renowned animators work, such as Emilio, Pablo and even more I don't know. Thanks Patrick!

Two passions have followed me in my life – drawing and music. They have always been there for me, to help me express and balance myself. I think this is the purpose of what we call ART. For me, art is a task done with heart, like a Pixar film. Art has helped me a lot, whereas school hasn't. At school I was considered a bad student. Sitting in the back of the class, I just drew with my headphones on and my cap pulled down over my very long hair. Then I went to animation schools like Pouliot and E.M.C.A. in Angoulême. I didn't fit into the mold required, but thanks to E.M.C.A., I produced my first animated film, a 23-minute piece named *Je m'mérite*. This film is a self portrait in which I completely let go of myself, and it probably saved me at the same time.

Then I went to Paris, where I was a contributor at the École des Gobelins, doing animation, script doctoring, mixing, voice-overs and animatics. Gobelins is a good school – or should I say that good students make a good school? I decided to leave the day the principal pointed at me and

said "Who is he?" It must have bothered him that I was giving advice even to students who were older than me. Even though students really wanted to work with me, I didn't have the big studio label the school wanted, so I left. The funny thing is that today a lot of students from that school are begging to train or work at our tigoboANIMATION collective. What they like is the team spirit of tigoboANIMATION, because it mixes the technical and artistic sides. It's true that this is a priority in my projects and in my animation approach. If they're not both well balanced, it doesn't really work.

I also taught in other schools in France, the kind of schools that have popped up in the 3D era. I finally left that too, because I felt that students were not respected. They pay way too much for the class time they receive, and once in a while to make up for it, the schools bring in a contributor from a big studio to please the students and to do some publicity at the same time.

A few years later, these experiences pushed me to create my own school, the tigoboSCHOOL. The objective of the program is to adapt the learning method to what the students need, not the other way around. At the same time, I am always working on my own stuff and staying totally independent. My past experiences, especially with comic books, have really persuaded me to stay independent even though it is not always easy. For me, it is easier to be independent and even alone with my projects than to sign meaningless contracts with producers or editors. Those abusive contracts give the producers and editors power over the creators who arrive tired and in need of work. They sign because they need to. It's not that I think there are no passionate producers or editors, but they are often found working with independent creators. For me, a good producer or editor is someone who totally listens to the creator.

In my comic book experience with the *Symhio* project, for example, the editor liked the graphics. Before he saw a single line of the script, his idea was to give me another script written by a script writer, to reduce the risk.

In the end, it was a pretty picture, with the script opening the door for Volume II, III IV and hundreds... For that reason, I decided not to accept their proposal. Some people could not understand my choice. They said, "You don't turn down an offer from those guys!"

A final note about comic books: I would jokingly add that the project was supported by Regis Loisel, who presented the project himself to his editor. I have to thank Philippe Caza too because he was the only one at that time who read my script and really gave his feedback. Then Moebius, who I talk to for hours, quoted Griot to me: "There are two roads before you, one simple, where you decide to sign rapidly, and one where you decide to defend your project, but that road will be long and hard." When you read this article, you will understand that I took the second option – the long and hard road. And to turn the page on comic books, I jumped into what I had pictured doing after Volume III of the comic book: the film *Symhio*. All these steps helped me confirm my need to be independent and to defend my projects to the end. That's when I created tigoboANIMATION with creators of all styles and all horizons. I developed a lot of other short films and fiction projects as well as documentaries, which helped me and continue to help me believe in independence. Sometimes alone, sometimes with a team that follows me in my projects. Until I find a producer who shares the same passion as me and my team, I will stay independent. One day Emilio Ghorayeb said to me, "Do you think it's possible to find a producer like that?" I answered, "If you and I exist, why couldn't there be a producer as passionate as us?"

# WORKFLOW



SYMHIO – WIP / 3D IMAGES FROM THE SHORT  
SYMHIO AND THE HUMMINGBIRD.  
WWW.SYHMIO.COM



WWW.SYHMIO.COM

## THE ANIMATOR IS AN ACTOR WITH A PENCIL

Animation – what a fascinating job! Giving life to a character in an adventure is to give a feeling of joy, doubt or tears, or to communicate a message. To bring your character to life for a year or more. To dissect each millimeter of his face and his unique movement, for only a few seconds of the film. All that precision to create a feeling in a scene or to serve the story or message of a film.

For me, the universe of animation is more real than a fiction film because of its uniqueness. There is no possibility of doing several takes for a scene. This is the unique side that I like. The characters really exist in their own world. Strangely, this gives me the impression that it is unique and more exceptional than a fiction film.

**Animation is a magical way of expression. A way of giving life to an imaginary world. This is the reason I have always been drawn to this kind of medium. We get to use all kinds of graphic styles to adapt to the story. For me, animation is an art linked to observation. My constant observations of human ways of being inspire the stories I bring to life in these characters.**

## SYMHIO AND THE PROJECTS

I developed Symhio a long time ago from a feeling I hold dear to my heart. “Au-delà du Kathong” is the complete title of the film, and it means “beyond appearances.” I drew the whole universe I had in my head, from the characters to the environment and lights. I wrote how these people live – daily habits, language, music. I wrote the script with my father, Christian Amanet. He’s the artist who has always inspired me the most.

Right now, I'm putting the finishing touches on a short film about Symhio under the guidance of Dawn Rivera-Ernster, a friend who has always believed in me. This short film is about a hyperactive hummingbird going from flower to flower quickly, and Symhio comes towards him slowly to observe him better. The game and contrasts between the two actions is exciting to watch in animation. The goal of this animation is to show the speed, lightness and elegance of Symhio as he moves in his environment and how he respects it.

As I work on *Symhio*, I'm also doing other fiction projects or animations such as *Le Pasteur* in 2D, *Tôle et barreaux* in 2D/3D, *Labyrinthe* in 2D, *Simi*, a fiction film with Maria de Medeiros, short films like *04* in 2D, *Où* in 2D and a few documentary films that I'm developing with Flavie Darchen, an animation producer. All these projects inspire and enrich the stories in my films. They all help me keep well balanced and not tire myself out on complicated projects like *Symhio*. It is really dangerous to carry on a single project for a few years. If I had done that on *Symhio*, I'd still be there waiting for answers and nothing would be done. I know a lot of artists who have not made it because of whole situation of waiting. Yes, I make mistakes, but these different projects keep my head clear and put food on the table.

The position of certain lines in my sketches helps me sense the little touch to add once the drawing is cleaned up, which will give the scene the tension I'm looking for.

#### WHY WORK AS AN INDEPENDENT?

To do this *Symhio* short independently, I drew on the support of a lot of passionate people: Flavie Darchen, Christian and Michèle Armanet, Dawn Rivera-Ernster, Maria de Medeiros, Julien Camillieri, Phil Brionès, Pablo Navarro, Issam Zejly, Hichem Arfaoui, Shawn Kelly, Emilio Ghoreyeb, Bolhem Bouchiba, Manu Katché, Marc Kra, Pierre-Alain Hubert, Danny Bergeron and Patrick Beaulieu. These people believe in this project and in the character of Symhio himself. They support the project because they yearn to bring Symhio to life. **The goal of independence is to be totally free at least for the teaser and the short film. That way I can push an idea to the end with a small team, instead of living in fear of a producer or a big network. This gives me the will to be free and to pursue experience without restraints.**



LABYRINTH – 2D FILM TEST FOR THE THREATENING CALIBER SCENE. ULTRA-RAPID ANIMATION TEST, WITHOUT A FLIPPER. THIS ALLOWS ME TO MAKE EVERY DRAWING QUITE DIFFERENT AND ACHIEVE GREAT TENSION IN SOME OF THE SKETCHES, WHICH I WANT TO KEEP FOR THE FINAL "CLEAN" DRAWING.

## THE TEAM – THE SHARING

Sharing is my way of developing animation with a person who likes the same things I like – drawings, movements, etc. I find this exciting.

Since I'm independent and self-sufficient, I'm also free to choose the people I want to work with. I surround myself with people who have chosen this career, not only to do animation but also to spread messages. **I don't believe that an animator who doesn't like the story or the character can do good animation. The character will move but it will be lifeless. The animators I work with express their feelings in a story or through their characters. They get involved and pour their sensitivity into it. That is animation – giving your soul to the character. That is sharing.**

The goal of sharing is for the animator to realize what I want before adding his own touch, so that the balance can be achieved. For example, when I do visual development for someone, I want to have all the important keys of the universe to understand it all before I start drawing. I love to create but I want to keep the creator's idea in the foreground. Creating something in his world, and not just in the general vicinity. Doing drawing that looks good is easy, but drawing from someone else's idea is something else. It's the same with animation. I tell them I want point A at this moment and point B at that moment. I give them keys, and everything in the middle is the animator's job: to bring in the details, the life and the little things that will surprise me. This only works with senior animators like Pablo Navarro, who I work with.

**In this case, the interest for me is to discover a piece of my world and to discover details of my character through the animator's interpretation. The team is the key. Because making a film is sharing: we have to talk and understand each other, and for that, we have to be on the same wave length.**



## PABLO AND ME

If I want to talk about a positive experience in my collaborations, I would have to choose the most recent one. For me, it was the strongest and the craziest with Pablo Navarro. He is a rare animator, a really great guy with a passion for animation. We experienced this on the short film *OA*, a 2D short film I dreamt up. The crazy thing in this story is that we didn't speak the same language. I speak poor English and he speaks no French, but we understood each other well, thanks to animation and our shared passion. It was the first time that I could speak of details that seem useless to some people but that are very useful to us.

That is what I was looking for on *OA* and all my other films. **Pablo likes the details that usually save time in animation. The little thing that reveals an emotion, a character's tic that betrays him. I call this the handprint of the real world or the little details that say something. This is what I like.** In *OA*, we were not afraid to try different tricks that were forbidden on the projects he had previously worked on. Pablo is an animator with a rare eye. He likes real details in a personality or human behavior. Small life-like details that reveal the character we are animating. That is what Pablo and I like more than anything else, like the small eye movements that say so much when we first meet someone. These movements tell us whether the character is shy, pretentious, hypocritical or in love.



*OA* – “IMAGE OF THE HYPNOTIC SCENE”, TRIBUTE TO THE NINE OLD MEN  
FROM DISNEY AND THE CAT IN ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Personally, I like simple, effective animation, like we see in Japanese or Korean work. I don't like too much anticipation or exaggerated movements. I like it when we feel the anticipation but we don't see it, or when it's obvious, like in Tex Avery films. Exaggeration in anticipation or tuned in exactly to the crazy personality of the character.

I find the balance in Pablo's animations and his personality perfect, so I'm not under the impression that he is playing a scene. I adore the animation in Disney Studio films, but I wouldn't want that style in my films. Maybe because my characters are too close to me so I don't want to see them lie to me through exaggerated movements. **When Symhio turns his head, I don't want to see or feel an anticipation of the turn, but that is what they teach us to do, nevertheless. It gives me the impression that the character is not playing the part right. I find that characters like Symhio or OA are pretty enough as they are, without exaggerating. My characters are real and they should not play a role, so I don't have them exaggerating their movements.**

Pablo and I take great pleasure in animating the kind of real characters that are in *OA*. That's how we met. I knew his work on *Nocturna* and as soon as I saw his demo. I knew right away that *OA* was the exact opposite of what he had done before. At the same time, I sensed great control in his animation. Then he did a release and rapid test, and I knew then and there that I had found the person I was looking for to work on my project. I knew he was having a field day. That is all I wanted to feel. That was the only reason for the test. And I was not disappointed. His ultra-professional side, his respect for animation and for other people's work allows us to create the perfect balance. He came to my studio in Angoulême and we worked together on *OA*. It was an auspicious meeting and the beginning of a beautiful friendship.



"OFFICE SCENE" THE MAN'S ROUTINE

#### HOW WE WORKED AND CREATED TOGETHER ON *OA*: EXPERIMENTAL FULL ANIMATION

I gave Pablo some information, like the script, a little story-board, quickly done on the corner of a napkin, as Pablo would say, a music mock-up and the visual development of each scene. I did not push the story-board because I wanted to give Pablo a lot of maneuvering room to be free to create in the film as well. This complexity allowed him to put more punch in some of my scenes. I love to work with improvisations – that is how I direct and animate my films, and that's what I wanted in *OA* at all costs. This is what I want to develop in my team, but it's an approach with no strict restraints that doesn't work for everybody. In order for it to work, the person across the table has to have the flexibility and freedom to offer ideas and to try things out, which is unusual. Pablo has all the right qualities, the experience, the professionalism, the animation talent, the open mind... and my trust.

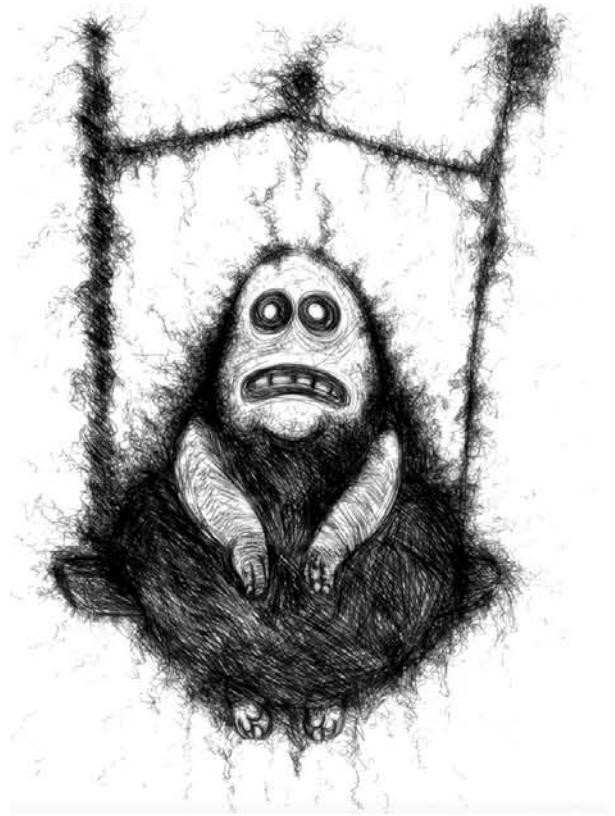
Sometimes he didn't know where he was going, but since he believed in me and in *OA*, he followed me. He told me one day that he was following me "like a blind man following his dog." It's a great expression that

illustrates Pablo's approach well: a team that is linked to its producer and that follows him with full confidence.

It's a huge responsibility for me, and also for the people I'm working with, because I'm always scared to fail. Telling Pablo what to do gave me the confidence I needed to do my best. Pablo trusted my proposals. Sometimes it surprised him, but he understood the character perfectly. He could add details or ideas in the middle of a scene that made us laugh and improved the project each time. In certain animation shots, I wanted things that surprised Pablo at the time. For example, I wanted my character be animated systematically, which is a "no-no" in animation.

In one particular shot, for example, even when he questioned me, Pablo did what I asked, and that produced interesting results in the end. We learned a lot from that shot. Then in the same scene, Pablo said, "This passage is too long, don't you think? I'm scared the audience might fall asleep." I jumped on that remark and suggested that we have the *OA* actually fall asleep then, to play with the audience and accentuate the story. This film also communicates the message that we live in a world of consumption where everything has to go fast. We were glad we tried it.

This is really a perfect example of sharing between two animators/sketchers who like a project and always think of what the other wants. It's a balance of strengths. Thanks to sharing with Pablo, I could see how much I wanted to play and eliminate all the barriers in this film. Pablo came up with the term "experimental full animation" to describe the animation born out of our collaboration, and I agree since it sums up what I have been doing since we worked together on this film. Controlling the animation to achieve the freedom to experiment and trying things that are usually forbidden in animation.



*OA* – IMAGE OF THE HAIRY OA IN "THE WHITE WORLD".

#### MY VISION OF ANIMATION

In the *Symhio* project, I want the characters to be 100% real. I don't want over-played or exaggerated action. I want a character that is real because my world and my characters are real and they have no right to become actors. What I find interesting in animation is that the character is more real than a fiction actor. The fiction actor is playing a role; he can redo the scene if it's bad, because he's acting. Whereas in animation, the character is not acting; he is living. The character never redo a scene because it is live. The character is unique in its own world.

An example I find brilliant and crazy is the idea of out-takes that they put in some Pixar films. The characters, like actors, redo their takes. The ideal is brilliant, but at the same time, it's sad that the character is less unique in its story. I know I'm repeating myself; the idea is brilliant, but what bothers me is that the characters are real but they're not true to their story. They're only playing a role in a script. An animation character that acts, as if it were real, is an animation actor. I'm not sure I'm communicating what I mean, but I'm trying to say that the fact that an animation character must stay true to his story is the opposite of a fiction film, which is real. That is my point of view. Animation supervisors have a big job on their shoulders. They have to hold a hero for a few years, and each animator gives life to a part of the character – three minutes maximum each year – and all those fragments done by different animators must, at the end, be the same hero. Hats off to you guys!

Now you understand. All I want is for animation to be well thought through. That is what I'm trying to create with *Symhio*. Here's another example that illustrates what I'm trying to find in animation, which we get by observing. This imprint fascinates me. In the film *Heat*, in the beginning before the shooting, Al Pacino arrives at the murder scene and gives orders to his men. He starts to analyze the situation, giving out orders and all that without looking anybody in the eyes. Our eye is caught by his game and his presence. This attitude lends a lot of strength to the character. The audience is hypnotized by the orders given by Al Pacino. He's the focal point of the whole scene. The fact that he does not look at the others draws our attention to him and what he is saying. If he

was looking at the other characters, our attention would be scattered elsewhere. It's this intensity between the actions that I want to achieve in my films.

Animation is an incarnation without the entire stratagem. It's just what we need. I think that if we did that same scene in animation, it would work really well. It's efficient and it works. In animation, we have the tendency to exaggerate the movements, especially in 3D.

To my eye, animation tends to lose itself in the unnecessary details so that a scene will be fascinating to the eye or on screen. It may be good for comedies or cartoons, but not for all mediums, because it becomes too much. We have to do attractive scenes. If you take films by Michel Ocelot, for example, the graphics and the animation shots are very efficient and I love that part. This allows him to create his own style and handprint.

Another example from the film *Heat* is the scene where Al Pacino and Robert De Niro are face to face. You'll notice that they almost never look at each other when they speak. This is what gives the scene all its intensity and tone. It is also the signature of both these talented actors. How would we do this scene in face-to-face animation? One would most likely be smoking as a pretext to give the character some content when he doesn't need any. In animation, some actions can be redundant and even over-played because we are scared that the viewer will be bored or not understand the picture that was created from scratch. In fact, there is no clear evidence in an animation film since everything is imaginary, contrary to fiction where all the scenes are real. Animated films need an unconscious distance and adaptation time for the viewer who is trying to understand and identify. Animation is also scared of the silence, the unknown and the emptiness of an image. Except Japanese and Korean animation, where they often use fixes in the narrations.

In animation, unlike film, no improvisation is possible, because everything is prepared and accounted for. Everything is in the picture and it is created over years, so you are not allowed to make any mistakes. An animator is an actor in slow motion because he creates the picture frame by frame, in each second of life.



MYKHIO – THE BLUE, DECORATIVE, WOODEN BALL EXCHANGER. "THE KAKHAKS"

## MY WAY OF WORKING AND THE SIDELINES

Now I'd like to talk about two projects I'm currently working on, the first one being *Symhia*, a project with a 3D tool, and the other being the short *OA* in 2D. Starting with these two examples, I will dissect my way of working in animation and also talk about my approach to all the other steps in filmmaking.

These two projects are graphically different. The scripts, graphics, music and animation are different from every point of view. One is in 3D and the other is in 2D. The message is basically the same but it is expressed through two totally different stories. One is in a poetic fashion and the other is in a cash fashion.

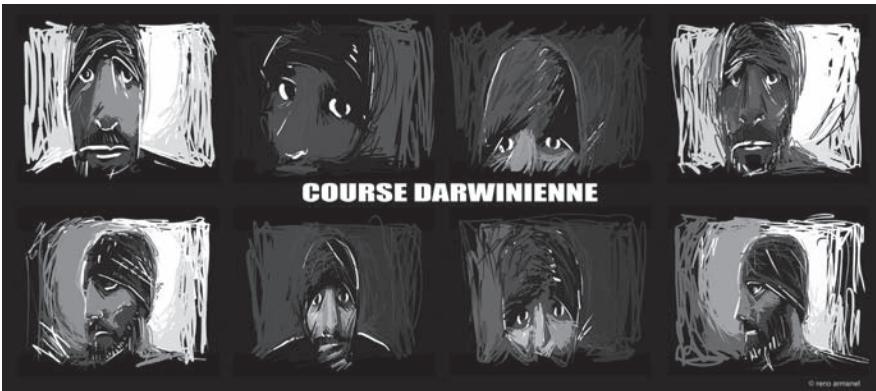
In *Symhia*, I am looking for animation that is poetic, sincere and without lies, but for *OA*, I want a picture that disturbs the audience. In fact, I want to do all sorts of things that we don't normally do in animation. So let's start from the beginning.

An idea comes to mind. With this idea, a story is born, and with this story a world, a style, an odor, sounds, colors, movement and timing are created. All these elements inform the visual development of the project.

## VISUAL DEVELOPMENT

The development of a film has always fascinated me. It's like a door we go through to an imaginary world, our world. Each idea corresponds to a visual development of its own. Visual development is a real passion for me. I love drawing the whole environment of an entire world. For the last 17 years, I've had an animation "bible" called art book, a mini *Illusion of Life*. In it there are studies from Pinocchio and Fantasia. These studies are real masterpieces. I find that these works are overlooked in the art world. I don't understand why great exhibits are held on painters, but that these illustrations made by great artists are just in art books and aren't given a place in an exhibit.

I also think that in certain productions, there is an over-consumption of talent. In *Atlantis*, for example, they asked two authors – Mike Mignola and Regis Loisel – to create the universe for this film. I found this to be



a curious mix, because they have two completely different styles. I believe that if they had given the visual development to Mignola, it would have been a more original graphic and personal film. Anyway, it created good graphic research books and nice films. But I can't help but wonder what Mignola would have done with the film on his own...

The graphic research for a film does not only consist of finding characters, colors and décor. It is also about creating characters, habits, trees, odors, sounds, ambience and soul. Well done and well thought-out environmental development helps us to manage the whole film and animate it better. Knowing whether the ground is damp or cold, whether the character is barefoot, whether he has large feet... knowing the character's details and environment help us to manage the film and the way the body has to move. Then we have to find the right tool to draw him. The choice – pastel or marker – allows us to develop a better world and better characters. Personally I don't really think about it. It just comes naturally, but then I have experience using unusual tools, and I can discover the same universe from a different angle.

I want to tell you one more thing about visual development. One day at the Disney studios in Los Angeles, producer Roy Conli and my friend Dawn started talking about my film *Symhio*. They talked about it without have even read the script. They understood the story just from my universe research graphics. In my eyes, this is the best possible compliment for my visual development work as a sketcher.

*Symhio* is graphically and poetically smooth. The characters have almost human proportions and are fully tattooed. It's a world of music – a sort of fantasy version of our world. The other project is *OA*. *OA* is a character covered in ass hair that he sprinkles like rose petals. This project talks about our crazy human world. So the style reflects the theme, and the graphics are very abrupt.

I would like to talk about the behavior of some people I have met in my studio or elsewhere. On one side, there is *Symhio*, and on the other there is *OA*. These two examples correspond to the type of problems there are in art in general. We absolutely need to classify people. Take me, for example. Some people consider me to be the type of an author with projects like *Intox*, *Je m'méprise*, *Course Darwinienne* and *OA*. And others see me as a more commercial sketcher, with a style like Disney, because of *Symhio*. We all know this doesn't mean anything. A Disney-style sketch with the correct proportions gives you realistic characters with clean lines. It's less personal. *Symhio* and *OA* each say the same thing but in a different way. That's why they are drawn differently with different tools, but people don't approach them the same way. *OA* is disturbing, so some people turn to *Symhio* and say, "What a cute character!" or the opposite, for people who like the indie style.

Of course it is normal to prefer one style to the other, but I don't understand people judging by style, such as indie, Disney or commercial. *OA* may be classified by some people as an indie film, and *Symhio*, because it's a big 3D project, as a commercial film. I find that stupid, since they are both author's films. For me, author's films just say that an author has a message or a story to tell in a film or an animated film with graphics and production that adapts to the message – that's all.

Films by Brad Bird and Michel Ocelot are author's film films. I don't like this way of isolating these universes and labeling authors. I think there are enough barriers in our world and in our lives that art should not have any restrictive barriers. Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, I like to discover new things. I believe that art is not only to be loved but to be seen. It is made for us to react to. It's a vital part of life. A world without music would be very gloomy.

A friend was telling me that he didn't like Davis Lynch because his films disturbed him. That's perfect. It is a very good criticism because the films make him feel uncomfortable – not a pleasant feeling. It's an artistic reaction for me – and maybe for Lynch also – to create new sensation. Art is not made to be cute and pleasant. Art is not created to please or gratify; on the contrary. I think we have to be open at all sorts of styles and just let it go. Art does that on purpose. In animation, I like Grimault, Michel Ocelot, Tex Avery, Hiroyuki Okiura, Katsuhiro Otomo, Yoshiaki Kawajiri, Isao Takahata, Trey Parker, Matt Stone, John Lassater as much as I like Pete Doctor and Brad Bird. Visual development is a passionate part and a prime necessity in animation. I find the Monsters Inc. art book to be an excellent example of a perfect result.

#### WHY THE 3D TOOL IN *SYMHIO*?

*Symhio* is a character with particular proportions. He's skinny with very large muscles like Bruce Lee, firm, defined muscles so the character is in total control of his movements and completely smooth. For example, when *Symhio* throws his foot out for support, the placement is controlled and smooth. I want poetry in each of his movement, so I need sharp animation work.

Before animating this sympathetic character, I had to decide how to do it. What techniques would I use? On this project, I only animated a few tests in 2D. I also did tests with Philippe Brionès, Clean-up Chef for *Tarzan* and author for Marvel Comics. The tests showed us early on that the character would be really hard to animate. Philippe, in a half mocking, half-serious tone, told me if I did the film in 2D, there would be hangmen in the studio. When Philippe Brionès says something like that, given his skill, you have a tendency to believe him.

I was also driving myself crazy trying to draw and redraw the character. His neck is extremely long, and in extreme poses that takes a lot of work because he doesn't have the classic proportions. I'm not saying it's impossible to do in 2D, but that would cost a lot of time just for the *Symhio* character, who is fully covered in tattoos and has wide pants with strips of fabric that hang and swing. The workload would have been just too heavy.

The only solution in 2D was to simplify everything or delete some elements. For me, that was out of the question, because we would have lost *Symhio*'s soul. He would have become a character that adapts to techniques, instead of having the techniques adapt to him. It's more logical that when we create a universe, we choose the right technique to represent it. This way of working can also lead to new discoveries and enrich the project. So that's how *Symhio* became virtual. I chose 3D.

### THE 3D TOOL

A lot of studios want to do 3D animation without first knowing what film they want to do or even what subject, what style, etc. They absolutely want to do 3D, or worse, motion capture. To my mind, this is horrific. They are the worst kind of botchers, and completely ignorant about animation. If all they want to do is a realistic film, why not do a fiction film? They chose 3D because they think Pixar made its money on 3D. What they don't understand is that even if Pixar did a film in papier maché, it would work, because behind the scenes are some great artists who are passionate about animation and they are the success behind the 3D tool.

### MODELIZATION

#### Common problems

I would also like to say a few words about 3D modelization because there is a direct link with animation. I find that in certain types of films, there is a wave of modelized characters that are flat – and I mean totally flat. Strangely, we don't feel any volume or strength in these characters. These characters often have no dynamics or flexibility in their designs. I call them soft characters.

3D adds volume quickly, but without structure, volume is usually approximate. I would call them bubble gum characters, and I'm not talking about their anatomy. For example, we often see hands with just three fingers, and all the phalanx of each finger have the same length. I find it important to keep the notions of drawing and sculpture when modeling a 3D character – whether he's realistic or a cartoon, it's the same thing.

Be careful of 3D software. It seems fast but the main work – like drawing and reflection – is still the same. The 3D tool is just starting out. We are still in the period of imitating Pixar. I don't mean that what belongs to Pixar should remain Pixar's. First of all, you can't copy it anyway, and second, who has any interest in doing so? But it is still curious to see a lot of films trying to do the same as them, with Django Reinhardt-style music. A lot of the 3D demos I receive have Django Reinhardt music, but it's rare to see short films in 2D redone like Disney. 2D films are often different in the end. They are more personalized, and I find that it is not yet the case in 3D. We want to imitate the creators, but we are still at the beginning of this wave, this fascinating wave created by Pixar, the Pixar syndrome, and so on, but then again, it's a new wave.

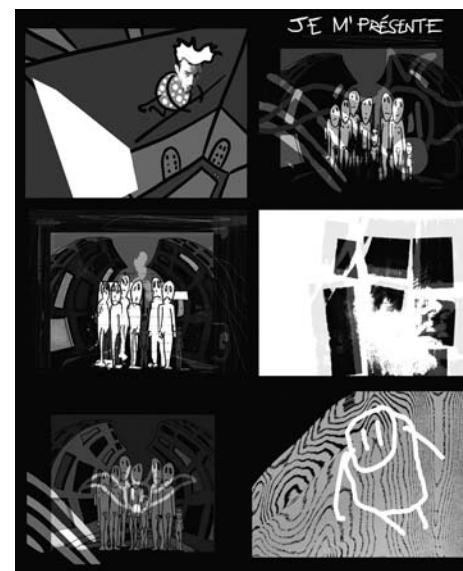
Speaking of which, I'm certain that 2D will survive and be re-launched. For example, Michel Ocelot films such as *Princes et Princesses*, *Kirikou*, and *Azur et Asmar* really please children and adults alike, in France anyway. The children I work with in France often surprise me by reciting quotes from their favorite Miyazaki and Ocelot films.

This is not the case in every country. Most of the time, it's the American films that they refer to. It's too bad for these kids, because it closes their eyes to one sort of graphics and one world. I'll come back to that a little later. When I think that *Kirikou* was rejected by the Americans because we see a nude child or African women with bare breasts, I get mad. In Africa some people live that way.

Michel Ocelot set an example for me because he knew how to defend his unique style and his ideas. He held on to his project for years by believing in his work and he proved that it was possible. No matter

what medium he uses – paper cut-outs, 2D or 3D – Michel makes useful films and speaks about them clearly and logically. He told me that animators often have the tendency to over-animate when it is not always necessary, and I agree with him. Meeting him drove me to push my project with that same determination and to believe in what I do.

To come back to 3D modelization, I had to re-modelize my *Symhio* character because even with the sketches and anatomy pictures, I wasn't getting the volume and curve dynamic I wanted. I got in there and worked on it myself – it's also good for a director to touch a little of everything. This generates a better understanding of the work the team is doing. What I noticed was really interesting: the re-modeled foot with the real structure in the same animation was 10 times more dynamic. I felt the contact with the ground better and the sensation of support. But nothing had been modified in the animation, just in the modelization. I rebuilt my character by adding flexion points, which are light but necessary to find the curves and the anti-curves in the 2D animation. I'm still trying to find these sensations in 3D.



*JE M'PRÉSENTE* – MY FIRST ANIMATED FILM, A 23-MINUTE SELF-PORTAIT COMPLETELY CREATED BY MOUSE WITHOUT A FLIPPER, USING MY RIGHT HAND (I'M A LEFTIE) TO ACHIEVE COMPLETE SINCERITY IN THE DRAWING AND THE THEME. THE IDEA WAS TO DO A TRUE SELF-PORTAIT WITH NO FAKERY, SO IT IS ALL ONE TAKE, SOUND AND IMAGE.

Now let me talk about my animation shots. I worked with a young animator by the name of Hichem Arfaoui. Hichem and I worked on the shots for this short film. One good example is the shot of Symhio's foot in close-up, when he enters the field and rests his foot on the rock for support. In this close-up, I wanted you to feel Symhio's touch, the nature, the coolness of the rock, and Symhio's respect for the world. In the *Symhio* teaser shown in Cannes, a friend from Montreal said, "As soon as he set his foot on the rock, I felt all the humanity of the character." That is exactly what I wanted everyone to feel, and yet it is only a foot on a rock. You can imagine that I nearly drove Hichem crazy – it was his first pro animation. I'd say, "Turn the foot a little bit, pull up on the right side, on the left side," and so on. But Hichem fixed all the little details quickly and ended up creating a good, sensitive, smooth shot in this short.

A lot of people hold on to that 40-second shot. These are the moments that are really important for me, because it shows that my passion and my perseverance pay off. Well done also to Hichem! He will go far in his career.

#### Common problems in 3D animation

In 3D animation, I regularly find characters that move but are lifeless. In this wave of 3D animation, there is some good and some bad. The good is that people who have never drawn or animated can, thanks to this tool, and can do it well. The bad is that others just use it to make characters move without really animating them at all. Those animations go from point A to point B, press play and that's it. They are straightforward with too much use of interpolation and 3D curves. There is no soul in the character. All the work of great 2D animators is completely ignored, and that is why I use harsh language, because I find that they don't respect the traditions or the art of animation. For me that is not animation. Animation is working on every image of the character to bring him to life.

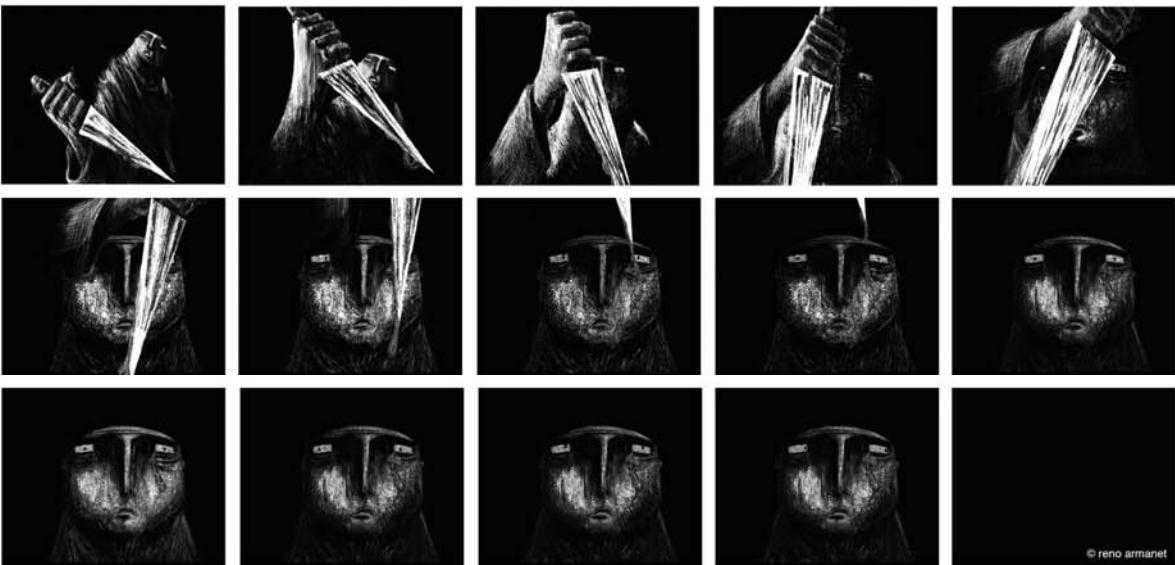
In 2D, that kind of thing is less frequent. I think 2D pushes you to think of your scene, what's going on and how your character feels. In 3D people often skip these reflection steps. 3D can go fast, but it is only an illusion. Animation is still animation, underneath all the techniques.

#### TIMING AND ANIMATED FIXES

You have to be passionate about timing. When you're working just a few images at a time, the scene expresses something different, and I love playing with timing in my films. In OA, the animation sticks to the music. Musical influences help me in my work as an animator. The perfect exercise for working on timing is 3-4 seconds of music or a voice that you like. You animate to that rhythm, cushioned, slow, fast and even. I would start with animated fixes. For me, a fix is the cutest. I like the silence in the breaks as much as the noise of an attack. That, too, is a matter of timing.

Take the fixes in certain episodes of South Park when something crazy is happening. For example, the episode "Cartman's incredible gift." At 1 minute 30 seconds, Cartman falls off the roof of his house. I find the animation and the timing perfect! The noise that accompanies it is impeccable, especially all the fields and counterfields that make us laugh. Those fixed shots reinforce the funny effect of Cartman's fall. It's incredible what can be done with so little animation and good timing.

MUSICAL  
INFLUENCES  
HELP ME  
IN MY WORK  
AS AN  
ANIMATOR.



INTOX – ANIMATION FROM THE "TEARS OF POWERLESSNESS" SCENE IN THE FILM INTOX ON CELLULOID.

Such efficient animation shots are very rare. The Wallace and Gromit short *The Wrong Trousers* features the most fixed, mysterious and funniest character in all the history of cinema. The fixes in the Penguin Thief are questionable, but the character's design is impeccable.

The real pros in this field are the Japanese. They know how to bring a scene to life with nothing. I'm thinking of a scene from *Ghost in the shell*. You have two men talking in front of an aquarium, and when either one starts talking, the camera comes around and shoots him from behind, so they don't have to animate his lip movements. This scene is composed of fixes only and nonetheless the ambiance is there. There is just a fish swimming around but all the intensity is there. Thanks to those fixes, it really lets us assimilate the important dialogue in this scene. There are also great fixes in *Jin Roh*, in the scene in the sewer with the flic machines. We don't need anything else – it's just what we need. That's Japanese efficiency.

Another example of efficiency is in scene where a plane flies over the ocean at high speed in *Porco Rosso*. The task cycles of overlaying blues one over the other, and the cycles of the water effect and the speed – it works to perfection.

It's interesting to compare American and Japanese animation because we can discern their cultures and their personalities. All you have to do is compare the river in *Princess Mononoke* with the one in *Bambi*. Both are really well made but totally different. One is simpler but just as efficient as the other. The question is which one?

Another film reference for me is *My Neighbor Yamada* by Isao Takahata. In this film, I find the drawing effective and nice, with superb animation fixes, good animation, and good timing with the little drawings he uses for big animation shots. A funny effect using animated cycles is *The Cuckoo Clock* (1950) by Tex Avery. It lasts 2 minutes 17 seconds.

#### LIMITED AND SILENT ANIMATIONS

In certain projects, I also like to do less animation or sometimes do very little and only play with sound, noise and music. I often do voice-overs (interior voices) for my characters to guide the spectator. As an example of efficient and limited animation, I'll take a classic sequence like the goat that is eating grass in loops for a while and ends up squashed by a dinosaur. I don't remember the name of this old black-and-white film. There are only two or three images that move, but nonetheless it is pure animation. The comedy effect at the end is surprising.

This is what pushed me to do voice-overs and dialogues. I'm independent so I don't have the means to make my films. I needed to find an efficient way to produce my projects with little animation. Since I also love to create voice-overs, it all worked together. This is what I chose for a few of my short films like *Intox*, *Le Cogisucideur* and *La Fusée*, which I co-produced with a friend. *La Fusée* is the story of a rocket that is supposed to take off but never does. Nothing happens in this image – just a fixed rocket – but the work on the noise and voice-over creates laughter in every movie theater.

#### SOUND, MUSIC AND TIMING COMBINED

I have different ways of working. Since I'm a musician, I often listen to a piece of music or an album and draw a universe inspired by the music. Then I add color, form and movement to my music. The most magical thing in all this is that the music already makes me feel the timing and rhythm of the character. It's fabulous for me to play my animation like I play my instruments. Pablo and I do exactly that in *OA*. We work on the music timing and that creates scenes where I have the impression that Pablo is playing a graphic instrument. The animation disappears in the music, just like an instrument does.

#### Silence

In a drum solo, the part that thrills me the most is the silence. The perfect silence between two beats of the drum. In animation, it's the same thing: a fix that we feel but don't see. This for me is magic because the timing of the fix is what gives all the power to the movement afterwards. It's really hard to do a good drum solo, Manu Katché-style, or a good fix like the penguin in Wallace and Gromit. That's why music and animation go so well together. I recommend that all animators, when they're watching their animation, should tap on the desk at the moment of the key poses. You'll hear the rhythm, because the key poses are the rhythm of the action. I don't think you absolutely have to be a musician. An animator knows his rhythm. I know the "tapping on the key poses" technique helps me a lot in my animations.

To animate simply is complicated, because animation is efficient, not simple. To make a complicated animation look simple, now *that's* complicated.

#### MY FAVORITE TRIGGER PLANS IN ANIMATION

##### Animation shrewdness and observation

My scene triggers in 3D are in Pixar films. The first time was in *Knick Knack*, a short film about a snowman. When I saw this film, my brain opened up. The intelligence of the script gave me electric shocks. I was astounded. It was also the first 3D I ever saw. Another trigger for 3D animation was another Pixar film, *Toy Story II*. One particular shot where there was hardly any animation impressed me. It was so subtle! The scene at the collector's shop when Woody is getting ready to leave and must leave behind his new friends. He is hesitant to leave – he's thinking about a lot of things, and the heartbreak of his old friends who stayed home and his new friends whom he has to leave behind. He lost it at the air duct, which is sad. It all happens in the eyes, in an extremely light and subtle way.

This shot marked me. It made me realize 3D was going to make us discover a new era in animation. The real trigger to the future that was opening up before us was flabbergasting. In this shot, I also saw the intelligence and the control of the choices, and I realized I did not need to worry about the 3D tools. This is the perfect balance between shrewdness and full animation. Everything is in the eyes. This scene is really beautiful. The eye animation is incredible. To analyze the eyes of each actor in a film we love can make us feel pain, fear, etc. Jack Nicholson is a good example.

I have far too many triggers in 2D, but just to name two, three or ten: the bear in *Rox and Rouky*; in *Kuzco* there are animation shots that are incredible and the timing is fantastic; *Manie Manie* is a magnificent film; *Labyrinth* is one of my favorites; in *My Neighbor Yamada*, the scene where the father takes vengeance, the fixes are fabulous. Then there's the devil in *Fantasia*, one of my favorite scenes in animation cinema. Tex Avery's scene in the fourth minute of *Garden Gophers* when Spike eats a hot pepper. Terry Gilliam's animated films.

My first trigger and the beginning of my longing to live these adventures was Miyazaki's *Sherlock Holmes*. As a kid, this film gave me my first longing to do animation. The list is still very long. My live-film references for timing and a feel for animation include the films of Buster Keaton, Louis de Funès, Laurel and Hardy, and Jim Carrey.

#### A LITTLE TRIGGER EXERCISE FOR PEOPLE STARTING IN ANIMATION

I will talk about my overall experiences, such as what I have felt in my animation career or in class – I hate that word – I mean, in the *sharing* I have experienced with other students from Gobelins School and other schools where I was a contributor, or a simple online training (tigoboSCHOOL) that I'm developing to adapt to the personality or the needs of the learner. **tigoboSCHOOL is a school where the teachers are called “animation enthusiasts.” I prefer this invented term to “teacher.” The objective of the training is to share knowledge and see what it feels like to work as an animator. For those of you who are just starting in animation, I advise you not to just stick to the rules. Let go and discover your personal style and touch.** I saw this with a student who absolutely wanted to animate in 2D but his drawing was too rigid; meanwhile he was great at volume. So we first started doing the volume exercises, and that allowed him to unblock certain things in his head so he could see what he felt in the movement. Then we came back to his drawing and he relaxed and stopped trying to do a pretty drawing. He concentrated on producing an animated drawing, with more efficient movement and speed. A lot of people confuse making an animated drawing and a pretty drawing. In this case they're wasting time on details such as well drawn teeth and gums, but totally forget the main features of a man who is running. The teeth and gums can wait. It's like a child's drawing.

Flavie Darchen, who is also an animator, often works with kids. We noticed that some teachers say to kids, “That is not how you draw a house or a face.” For me, that is art sabotage. A child draws a house as he feels it. If it's black, it means one thing. If it's round with yellow flowers, it means something else. That is the purpose of art: to let the subconscious speak without control.



LABYRINTH – A 2D ANIMATION FILM. HIS PAST IS BEHIND HIM.

I DON'T  
THINK  
YOU CAN  
LEARN ART;  
YOU CAN  
FEEL IT  
OR SHARE IT.



PHOTOS OF CHILDREN FROM BAMAKO DURING THE COMPLETION OF THE ANIMATED FILM TO HELP FIND A SOLUTION TO THEIR PROBLEMS.  
SERIES OF SHORTS, ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY WITH CHILDREN ON THE THEME "A SOLUTION FOR EVERY PROBLEM" ALREADY DONE IN BAMAKO,  
CHICAGO, CASUCÀ (BOGOTÁ, COLUMBIA), EREVAN (ARMENIA), PARIS

I don't think you can learn art; you can feel it or share it. Then we can improve some techniques but the basics are the same for each of us. To unblock the sensations, emotions or art that are deep inside us, I give little tricks. I advise the students to draw with the other hand or to draw upside down. These hints help break the automatism or fears that can stop us from drawing well, like in my teeth and gums example. It helps us work with the other side of our brain. I'm left-handed, but I did my first film, *Je m'présente*, with my right hand and a mouse. I did it as a self portrait. The words and the images were equally sincere. A self portrait is more interesting to do with the other hand, since our controlling hand has more control over the pencil. The result is more naïve, raw, sincere and maybe even childish.

Nevertheless, children's drawings that are said to be naïve are very pure drawings, without complexity, and without trying to please their neighbor. All that makes for really nice drawing. Let us not forget what Picasso once said – that all his life he desperately tried to unlearn how to draw so he could draw like a child. I find that we see this in his last paintings. The balance is perfect even though all is unstructured. That fascinates me. Some drawings that really took my breath away were by autistic children. I was amazed at the picture composition and their unbridled imaginations. Let's get away from the world of demonstration, especially art where everything is the opposite of perfection. Art is the basis of an unconscious balance that we achieve ourselves and that can then touch, help and take other people on a journey. This is my point of view.

#### A fun animation exercise

The exercise I often give in my courses is to animate a ball with one bounce, then two, three and four. When we understand the ball with one bounce and then more bounces, we have made a giant leap in animation. The trajectory of the ball and the number of bounces depend on the height at which you let it go. When we know how to animate a ball with one, two or three rebounds, we have fully understood what animation is. The rebounds correspond to the height, a hard or soft ball, hard ground or sandy ground. All this opens doors to understanding a character's incarnation, to draw him and bring him to life in his environment. We have to identify with the character we are drawing to understand and animate it properly.

One day a student said to me, "Reno, I didn't understand why you made me do and redo my two-rebound ball for a month. I couldn't take it. I thought you wanted me to get fed up with animation, but then you said 'This ball is good,' and I understood what you wanted me to do. The trigger! I wasn't able to get the trigger for a month. You only wanted a ball with two rebounds and I didn't have that because I was going too fast, thinking I could do this exercise easily without understanding what I was doing. It wasn't working. It moved but it was not animated since it didn't communicate a ball with two rebounds." He kept at it until my two-rebound ball was done and understood. He progressed quickly after that.

I don't understand why some teachers give ball drawing exercises without giving a history or personality to the ball, without explaining whether the ball is soft, the ground is hard, etc. Often in these cases, the student starts quickly without thinking of the ball's soul. You get the illusion of movement, but for me that is not animation, just displacement. All the reflections mentioned previously are important to give life to a character or even a simple ball. Another exercise I like to give is to give the ball a voice-over, to give it life. To animate on a voice-over with almost nothing – just stretches, crushes and vibrations.

## The walk

I'm talking about a natural walk, not an exaggerated one like Mickey. A natural walk is hard to do. Mickey's walk too. I'm surprised to see students do their first walk the same as Mickey's. Every time I say to myself, "Who walks like that in real life?" Imagine a world where everybody walks like Mickey. Starting with your own walk is better. Even then I'm surprised to hear students ask how they should make the character walk. My answer is "get up and walk!" I also see students who copy poses from books by Preston Blair or Richard Williams without realizing that they all know how to walk without comments from these animators. In 2D, this behavior is less common. The 3D tool makes us forget that it is humans who are doing the animation, not numbers, scripts or poses. The 3D tool should keep to its place so we can get better quality animation.

We have to observe, do a small draft version. It's always good to start with a plan and often it will save you time in the end, despite what we may think. I have been working for a while now on analyzing the hummingbird's movement in the world of *Symhia*. The hummingbird's movement is a perfect example that brings together all the basic rules for subtle animation. The bird anticipates his movements; he does these little buffer movements where he stops, stretches or crashes. The hummingbird has movement, incredible timing and really long fixes. His movements look almost false and exaggerated, like in a very good animated scene. There you go: my "illusion of life" is the hummingbird.

## A LAST WORD

For me, art is resistance to a world that I find totally crazy. So for those of you who are like me and choose to do animated drawing, we have to realize that we are lucky to do this kind of work. Art is a way of changing the world, and animation does just that. When I see *Nemo*, *Cars*, *Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* or *Kirikou*, it gives me hope. But I should add that we should not forget what people want to do with it. After the film *Nemo*, sales of clown fish exploded in the United States. The beautiful blue ocean they live in was ravaged by intensive fishing. It is just like what happens in the film.

I think some adults should go see the film again because they must not have understood it the first time. They say that animated films are for kids, but apparently the parents and adults did not understand the film. The films must have also opened the eyes of numerous people.

"Animated films are for kids." It makes me laugh when people say such a meaningless thing, because these same people will go see *Avatar* or *2012* without realizing that they are still seeing animated "kid" films. The special effects are animation! What changes and is maybe more "adult" is the impression of reality. I have never seen spaceships flying over my head or a glow behind my door. I'm looking forward to the day when people stop saying "animation is for kids." Or they will have to explain to me why 80% of adults watch fiction films before going to bed. It's just like the bedtime stories we heard when we were little before we fell asleep: a cute and false story to make us dream.

## THE FINAL WORD

I'll finish my text by paying tribute to Tex Avery and his team, Grant Simmons, Walter Clinton, and Michael Lah. They totally blow me away and always make me laugh. A thought also for Frank and Ollie (the 9 old men) who have touched me profoundly in my life with their books, drawings, animations and most of all their passionate friendship. Unfortunately I will never meet them. A dream of mine would be to thank them in person, but I'm happy to have seen some of their original drawings and the studios where it all started. And long live South Park!



# JASON SCHLEIFER



# BIOGRAPHY

Jason Schleifer is currently head of character animation on DreamWorks Animations' next project, which has yet to be named. Previously, Jason was a supervising animator on DreamWorks Animation's release *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*. Since joining the studio in 2003, Jason has been able to juggle multiple responsibilities while maintaining a consistent quality of work as a character animator. His main duties require him to translate the visions of the director(s), production designer and VFX supervisor into the character's movement and emotion within the film. Jason has also been collaborating with the character rigging department to test and provide feedback for new rigs, which can be clearly seen in the hit film *Madagascar*, its spin-off short *The Madagascar Penguins in a Christmas Caper*, *Over the Hedge* and the animated hit *Shrek the Third*. During his off-hours away from the studio, Jason enjoys being a mentor for an online animation school, AnimationMentor.com.

Prior to his career at PDI/DreamWorks, Jason had extensive experience at Weta Digital, beginning as a creature technical director, and later promoted to animation lead while making the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In addition to his film career, Jason has developed a couple of DVDs for Autodesk on creating animation rigs, as well as being a co-author and co-presenter of a SIGGRAPH 2002 course on character rigging. Jason has a B.A. with High Honors from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He also received an Honorary Doctorate of Animation from the Digital Media Arts College in Boca Raton, Florida.

# WORKFLOW

## ESTABLISHING THE PERFORMANCE

I think that in our rush to get things on the screen and see our characters coming to life, many animators start posing out the character and working on timing. I find that I have a tendency to do this when I'm feeling pressured to get a shot out the door, or when I am certain I know exactly what I want. However, it's incredibly important to ground yourself and get into the head of the character before you start animating. Truth to the character's performance is of utmost importance if we want to sell the character to the audience. If we're not inside our character's head, thinking how they think and reacting the way they would react, the audience won't believe that the character exists.

So before animating a character for the first time, I think a little bit about the character's background. **Who is he? Where is he from? What was his relationship with his parents like? What was the most influential experience he has ever had? How old is he? Is he comfortable in his own skin? Does he have any physical ailments? Did he stub his toes this morning? How self-conscious is he about his coffee breath?**

Then I start to try and figure out how he would move physically. I get up and move about as if I'm that character, taking note of how I hold my head in relation to my shoulders, where I keep the tension in my body, whether I lead movements with my head or my chin, how my arms and hands work together, etc. By doing simple exercises as if you are the character, you get a better idea of what type of physical limitations he may have. I also watch movies of characters that are similar to the one I'm animating. I want to see not only how similar characters move, but also how others react to that character.

These exercises are extremely important because they help you make conscious acting choices. Too often, we just start moving things around, coming up with "happy accidents" that look okay. In order to really make our characters come alive, we need to make purposeful decisions that are consistent and creatively interesting.

## TIP AND TRICKS - WORKFLOW

For most of my career, I approached every shot with an "Oh man, I really hope I don't screw this one up!" approach. Each shot was like a new experience. I would animate with different controls, jump back and forth between pose-to-pose and straight ahead animation. Playing with timing was a hit-or-miss concept where I would just look hopelessly at the animation curves and sort of smooth them out over and over until it looked right. I had no discipline and no confidence in my ability to get the shot finished to any level of satisfaction.

A few years later, the stress level and inconsistency of my shots was starting to get to me. I was constantly worried that my work wasn't up to par, and my shots were not at a constant level of quality I could be happy with. As I approached the shot deadline, my stress level would shoot up and I would have a really hard time finishing anything I was even remotely happy with. I knew that I had to make a change, or I would either have a heart attack or be fired. Therefore, I started looking at other animators and talking to them about how they approached their shots. I looked at my own workflow and analyzed what worked and what didn't. When did I feel comfortable and when did I just feel out of control? Then I focused on the areas of animation where I felt lost, and started to try to figure out what I could do to bring some order to the

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chaos. After much trial and error, I came up with a workflow that I now use on every shot. It keeps my stress level down and allows me to manage my time in a way that gets the shots to the level I want, within the schedule. I do make minor changes from time to time to the workflow, but the basics have been pretty solid for a few years now.

My workflow breaks down into various phases of animation. I found it important to specify them to myself in order to keep from jumping between phases before I was ready. Before I went through this exercise, I found that I would be trying to introduce new ideas to my animation halfway through polishing, which would end up making the shot time-consuming and too difficult. Or I would start polishing too early and spend time trying to get my finger animation correct before even knowing what poses I was using.

The phases I use are:

1/ Exploring ideas	5/ Rough cleanup
2/ Thumbnailing/reference	6/ First pass
3/ Shot setup	7/ Second pass
4/ Blocking/posing	8/ Finalizing

#### 1/ Exploring ideas

This phase has to do with trying to come up with as many ideas as possible for the shot. It includes getting a pitch from the director, listening to the audio over and over again, looking at other animations of the character, watching the shots before and after my shot, playing with various acting choices, and just writing down as many ideas as possible. I try not to limit myself in this phase, yet allow myself enough time to just explore and let my mind wander to the possibilities. Some animators play the “what if” game; that is, they say “What if the character does x? And then what if this happens?” For example, let’s say the shot is the character taking a sip of coffee. What if the coffee is too hot?

What if when the character drinks the coffee that’s too hot they jump back and spill a little on their hands? What if when they spill it, they drop the coffee mug? What if the coffee spills on their shirt and stains it? What if they were just about to head out the door? What if they go to grab a paper towel to clean up, but there are no paper towels? What if they grab a sponge instead? What if they start dabbing the stain away only to realize that the sponge is really stinky? What if they notice that THEY are really stinky? You can see how this can go on and on forever, right? It’s a great way to think of business for the character to do.

#### 2/ Thumbnailing/reference

In this phase, I take the exploration I’ve done and pick out the actions I like. Then I start to thumbnail ideas (draw little sketches) or shoot some video reference of myself. Sometimes I do both, sometimes only one or the other. I generally try to give myself enough time to make as many decisions about the shot as I can at this point. This is when animators get to “ad-lib.” It doesn’t cost anything to try another take in the video reference, or draw another pose or idea, so I might as well do it now before it gets expensive once we get into the computer. **I really enjoy using video reference and cutting it up into the best parts to get an idea for the timing. Sometimes, I draw over the reference as well. It all depends on what’s needed to get the idea for the shot in my head. I don’t leave this phase of animating until I have a clear idea of where I want to go in the shot. It doesn’t have to be 100% there, but if I can hit 70-80% clarity, then I’m very happy.**

#### 3/ Shot setup

Before starting to pose the characters, I spend 5 to 10 minutes making sure my shot is set up the best possible way for the action I’m planning. Spending a few minutes here can save you hours and days further down the track. First, I orient the characters so they’re aimed at whatever is going to work best for the shot. If they’re walking, I make sure they’re aimed in the direction they’re going to walk, that way all the various controls will be pointed in the right direction. If they’re acting to the camera, I aim them directly at the camera so I can easily control their screen direction. I also pick out the controls I’m going to use on the character for the shot. I found that by making note of what controls I want to use before I start animating, I have a much easier time when it comes to blocking and finessing, and I never accidentally move something that I’m not aware of.

#### 4/ Blocking/posing

The point of this next phase is to ensure that the director and I have a clear understanding of what the shot is going to be about. I want to present him or her with a clear vision, so that I can proceed with the knowledge that our brains are synched and I have no questions about any of the important beats in the shot. **It is primordial that the blocking phase is done correctly. Once you start loosening up your keys and ideas, overlapping, adding weight and following through, you’re going to have a very hard time making any changes requested by the director. So make sure that your blocking pass is clear!**

To start blocking, I get to the computer and start posing my character based on my thumbnails and/or video reference. I pose everything on the character on one frame, including the face. The idea here is to first create “Story” or “Golden” poses. These are the poses that define the attitude and staging of the shot. They are the “most important poses” because they tell the story. I use them to define where the characters are, what they’re going to do, etc. They should be perfectly clear and easy to understand. I like to think of them as similar to a comic book or storyboard, where each pose specifies an important action or thought. For example, if the character is going to pick up the cup of coffee, drink it, find it too hot and spit it out, you want poses for each of those beats. In this case, I would create the following poses:

1/ Looking at the coffee	5/ Recognition that it's hot
2/ Grabbing the coffee	6/ Spitting it out and
3/ Holding the coffee pre-sip	7/ Looking at the cup of coffee as if to say “what the heck?!?!?”
4/ Sipping the coffee	

These poses clearly define the actions. Only at this stage can I show my work to the director, but part of what needs to be defined in blocking is the length of time each action takes. If I just show these 7 poses evenly spaced throughout the length of the 200-frame shot, the director won’t really have a clear idea of my intentions. Even worse, if the poses were splined over those 200 frames, the director would be incredibly confused! What I need to do is clarify both the pose ideas and the rough timing of the shot.

In order to achieve this, I **create breakdown poses**. These are poses that help define how the character is going to move between two key or golden poses. I place these poses at the start of an expected transition, and at the end, so the director sees how long I expect the move to take and how soft or snappy I expect it to be. For example, if I want the character to look at the coffee for half a second before reaching for it and then have the time from reaching to holding equal a second, I break it down like this:

Frame 1 - Pose 1:	Looking at the coffee
Frame 12 - Pose 1 Breakdown 1:	Starting the hand moving towards the coffee
Frame 22 - Pose 1 Breakdown 2:	Almost touching the coffee
Frame 24 - Pose 2:	Grabbing the coffee
Frame 26 - Pose 2 Breakdown 1:	Starting to lift the cup
Frame 30 - Pose 2 Breakdown 2:	Defining the path of the cup coming up towards the mouth
Frame 34 - Pose 2 Breakdown 3:	Ease into holding the coffee pre-sip
Frame 36 - Pose 3:	Holding the coffee pre-sip

Now I have a clear definition of what the acting is, and roughly how long I expect each action to take. This is something I can show a director and get notes on!

## 5 / Rough cleanup

After obtaining approval on my blocking, the next task is to clean up the animation and get it out of stepped mode and into spline. For many animators, this is one of the most difficult and scary parts of the animating process. They’re taking a shot that’s fairly well defined and clean, and trying to make it now look smooth. What most animators do is simply select everything, convert it into spline, and then start tweaking animation curves to try and clean up the mess. I find that this can cause so much heartache and pain that it is usually almost too scary to do, and I never really get the animation back to the crisp acting that I loved in the blocking stage. So I developed a workflow that I use on a daily basis that eliminates the fear that normally permeates this stage of animation. I have a detailed explanation of this process here: <http://jasonschleifer.com/2008/12/30/repost-fear-of-moving-past-blocking/>

## 6 / First pass

Now that my animation is neatly cleaned up, I can start adding the details that will make the shot feel “right.” This means making sure the weight is correct, breaking up body parts that hit all at the same frame, making sure the balls of the feet are animated correctly, that the hands, face, torso, etc., all move with proper arcs. **At the end of the first pass, the goal should be for the weight and force to feel correct throughout the whole animation.**

## 7 / Second pass

While the first pass is all about making the shot feel “right,” the second pass is about making it feel “special.” This is the point where you want to add the little things, like tiny circles in the motion of an arm, offsetting the fingers, preceding a motion with just a tiny bit of anticipation. It’s all about the subtle things that will make the shot sing.

## 8 / Finalizing

At this point the shot is finished; you just need to make sure that all the loose ends are buttoned up. Here I check finger contacts, eyelines, double-check arcs, make sure that there are no “invisible walls” (when something seems to hit a wall, but there’s nothing there), etc. I love this phase because it’s all cleaned up. I can put on my headphones and just crank.

So as you can see, my main trick is all about segmenting my workflow into digestible chunks. I try not to overwhelm myself, and if I ever do feel overwhelmed, then I break up the thing I’m working on into smaller pieces so I’m *not* overwhelmed. It really helps me focus and keeps me from getting lost in the work.

## APPROPRIATE ACTING CHOICES

**I make sure I know who the character is; I work very hard to ensure that every choice I make is true to that character’s personality. If I’m unsure, I ask!**

I LIKE TO BREAK THE BODY UP INTO SMALLER CHUNKS AND POLISH A BIT AT A TIME.

## VISUALIZE THE SCENE IN YOUR HEAD

This is the “Exploring Ideas” phase that I was talking about earlier. I can’t stress enough how much it helps when this is part of your workflow. Make sure it remains part of your routine; force yourself if you have to. Hide your mouse and keyboard, step away from the computer, go outside with a pad and paper and set a timer for 30 minutes to come up with as many options as possible. You will find that, out of 100 ideas, maybe 10 are interesting, 5 are possibilities, and 2 are really good ideas. However, more often than not, your first ideas aren’t among those 5 possibilities; those only come through much thought and deliberation. Even if you end up using your first idea, at least you know you thoroughly explored other options and aren’t just taking the standard route!

## POLISHING

When I’m in the polishing phase, I like to break the body up into smaller chunks and polish a bit at a time. I will start with the large body parts first because they tend to control the smaller parts. For example, if I polish the fingers before I polish the arm, I may end up having to re-polish the fingers. Thus, my order is: torso, head, arms, hands, legs, and feet. When polishing, I hide the parts of the body I’m not looking at to keep myself from being distracted.

I step through every frame of the animation, making sure each body part is doing exactly what I want at each frame. Even though the computer may be inbetweening each frame, I still feel responsible for each frame; if it’s not doing what I want, I have to fix it.

Offset and overlap the various parts of the face, make sure it feels fleshy. Remember how the face moves; the big muscles pull the skin. Therefore, when the brows lift, delay the eyelids by a frame or two to help it feel like they’re pulling.

Instead of making tweaks and then playblasting, and then tweaking again and playblasting again, I make a list of 10 fixes to do, and tackle them all before playblasting. Afterwards, I make another list, and then tackle that list. By fixing chunks before blasting, I cut down on wasted time.

## CHARACTER ACT

There are two things that really nail emotion for me in a character. One is the pose, and the other is the change between poses. It’s really important to make sure that you’re aware of how much emotion can come from the change that happens over time. You may find that you can draw a great concerned brow pose, but how concerned does it really feel? It isn’t until you tighten that brow just a little bit more that the real concern comes out. Or if you release the tension just a touch, suddenly the character feels a little lighter; remember we’re looking at moving pictures. Don’t forget about making the pose move to really make the emotion come through.

## THUMBNAILS AND PLANNING

I probably don’t use them as much as I should. I tend to want to thumbnail more than I actually do. I really do recommend them, though! For very complicated acting or physical movements, planning out the shot in 2D is a great way to go. It really helps if you can look at a top-down view of your scene and sketch out where the character is going to be over time, and how multiple characters will relate to each other. **Sketching and drawing is so fast – it’s an instant way to try various ideas and quickly come up with a solution you’re happy with.**

## INSPIRED PERFORMANCE IN YOUR CHARACTER

It’s all about being true to your character. If you make sure that your acting choices are honest and coming from the character’s core, then they’ll be inspired. I also ask around and see if my acting choices are reading, and get notes on whether or not they’re the best choices. Sometimes someone else will have a better idea, and I’ll decide to go with that.

## ACT IT OUT

Certainly. Sometimes I act it out, film it, edit together various takes and find the correct one. Other times, I just act it out in my head. I always work through the physicality of it in some way, to make sure I'm doing the right thing. Too many times I've been looking at some animation I did, thinking "that just doesn't look right" only to find out that when I try and act it out, my weight will be on the other foot, and my arm movements will be quite different.

## REFERENCE

The best reference is any reference. I look at animated films, live-action films, people in person, people in my head, drawings, notes, etc. Anything and everything I can get my hands on. I do tend to stare at people sometimes, which can have its drawbacks, especially if they notice...

## PLANNING VS. ANIMATING

I usually don't take enough time planning. I like to give myself at least an hour or two to plan and think through my ideas before even remotely thinking about animating. Sometimes, I take a day or two, depending on the shot and how much planning is involved. Other times, I take 5 minutes just to set the shot up and then I start right in. The general rule is that the more complicated and the more important the shot is, the more time I spend planning.

## KEY IDEAS OR PHILOSOPHIES LEARNED IN MY ANIMATION CAREER

**The biggest thing I've learned is to try to be true to your character. You can animate the best, most fluid gorgeous thing in the world, but if it's not true to the character, then it's not correct.** You have to really know your character and get inside their head.

The other thing I've learned in my career – and that I recommend everyone to learn – is that animating is not a solo sport. It's highly

cooperative; you will work with many people, some new to the industry, some 30-year veterans. They are all important, and they all have valid input. **Don't ever shut out an idea because it came from someone with "less experience" or from "another department" or a "non-animator."** Anyone can have a good idea, and you should be open to and appreciative of all feedback.

## PROBLEMS - SOLUTIONS

My workflow has generally helped me overcome most problems, but sometimes I do run into situations where I can't quite get what I want. In those instances, I lean on the help of other animators and ask if they have any suggestions or advice. Inevitably, someone will have a good idea and I'll be able to work from there to solve the problem. The most important thing is to try to realize when you have the problem and solve it before it becomes a BIG problem. Too many animators (and I have done this myself) feel like they have to solve it themselves. They bang their heads into the problem over and over, spinning themselves into a downwards spiral of depression and anxiety, sometimes spending days and weeks on the shot but never really pulling out and delivering what they should. If I feel this is starting to happen, I immediately call someone or bring them over to get some advice. Forget the ego – get help! :)

## ONE WORKFLOW

I use the same general process for all types of animation. Sometimes, I block in spline mode instead of stepped, if it helps sell the idea better. Sometimes, I shoot a lot of reference; other times, I just act it out in my head. Once I start animating, the workflow generally stays the same all the way through to final. The thing that changes based on the style of animating is how far I take certain things. In snappy animation, I still go through all the phases, but my poses are held longer and my transitions are faster. In more realistic animation, I offset my arm, legs and head more, make sure the poses aren't held, and keep things moving.

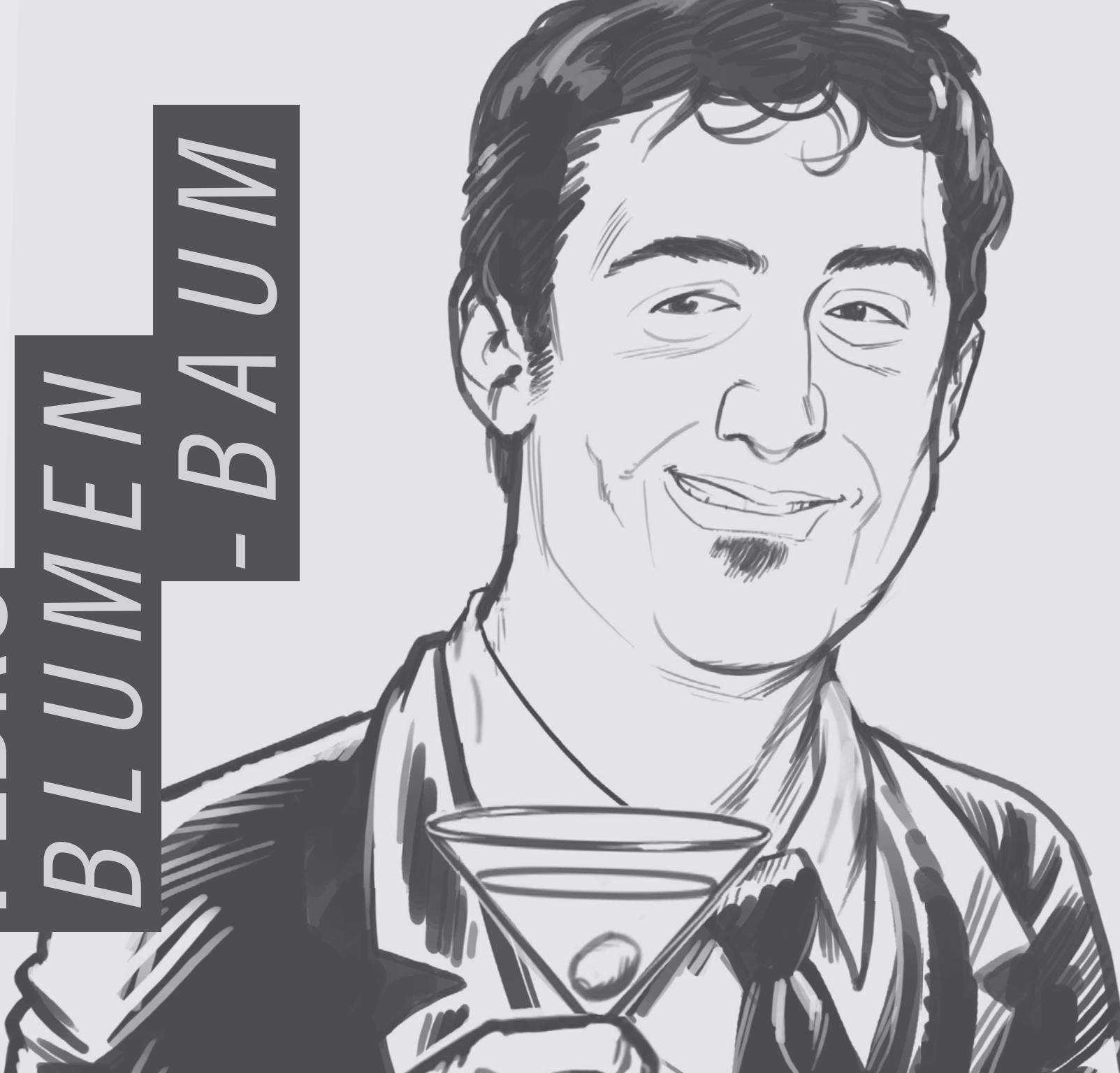
## LIMITS

The main limit I have at the moment is my own acting skill. Being able to pick the absolute best choices for each character and for each shot is something that's always a challenge. As animators and artists, we need to push ourselves to keep being stronger and better. It's always a challenge to try to make every shot interesting and the best it can be, especially with the pressures of deadlines, increased quality requirements, software issues, and more. I've found that by sticking to a pre-defined workflow based on breaking down shots into easily digestible stages and chunks, I can remove a lot of the fear and trepidation that I would normally have while working with shots. Once that's done, the limitations just sort of melt away.

THE BEST  
REFERENCE  
IS ANY  
REFERENCE.

PEDRO

BLUMEN  
-BAUM



# BIOGRAPHY

## LIVING THE DREAM, DREAMING THE REAL

I was born on December 14, 1976, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was raining so hard that afternoon, it was almost a flood. Every year on my birthday, my mother would tell me the story of how my father had to row through the streets, sitting on the roof of his car to get to the hospital! (She might have exaggerated a little bit!) According to several eastern cultures, being born on a rainy day is a sign of good luck for the baby. Well, I have to admit I have felt really lucky several times in my life so far!

My childhood was quite average for a kid in Buenos Aires; going to school, riding my bike in the park on the weekends, playing some soccer (not much), and best of all, watching cartoons all afternoon! Tom & Jerry, Looney Tunes, Mazinger Z, GI Joe, Thundercats, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the list goes on and on. In fact, watching TV was my main activity – I've never been much into physical activity! (Kids, don't listen to me! Practice some sport and eat your vegetables!) And like many other artists, it was my mother who first introduced me to the fun of drawing. She was an art school teacher in Mar del Plata, a coastal city to the south of Buenos Aires. She quit her job by the time I was born and she moved to Buenos Aires with my father, but she managed to teach me a few things about art during my childhood. I still remember a game we used to play for hours. She would draw a doodle on a page, just random lines and curves. She would give me that sheet and I would have to find "something" in there; sometimes I could see a car, some other days an old lady, etc. Every time I saw something, I would have to draw it on the top of that doodle. I could spend all day playing that game.

## THE DAY I QUIT PLAYING

I can still remember how I quit playing with my toys, which I guess is a very important moment in the life of every kid. Especially so in my case since it also meant the discovery of my vocation. One day, I realized that every time I played with my toys, I would first draw a kind of a storyboard about what I was going to play! In fact, I used my eye as a camera (closing the other eye) and always kept my storyboard near me to see what the next shot was. Until there came a point when I realized that I was having more fun drawing the storyboard than actually "playing the game" afterwards! This was the transition between childhood and puberty. So I put my GI-Joes into the box for the last time. In fact, I reckoned that I wanted to tell stories as a living...

Thereafter, whenever asked about what I wanted to be in the future, I would always say advertising. All I knew about advertising at that time was that you drew a lot of storyboards and sketches in order to communicate the idea to the client, and that was what I wanted to do. At that time, I thought that animation was something that could only be done in Hollywood. I didn't know there were animation studios in Buenos Aires or anywhere else in the world! In fact, I wasn't considering animation at all. I was just beginning college by then, and I thought I could combine my regular studies with my career, but that wasn't possible; I had to finish college first, then I could get a degree in advertising. I was so excited about doing something else besides college that my father suggested I enroll in an art school so that I could go to college during the week and art school on Saturdays.

That place was so inspiring! All the time surrounded by drawings and paintings of great artists, learning tons of new things from my teachers and the other students... Those were definitely happy times! If it were up to me, I would have moved to that place and stayed there to live! One day, my friends and I discovered a tiny little ad on the board at the entrance of the school. It was asking for artists to work at an animation studio. Suddenly, I realized that I hadn't considered animation as a working field, so it began to attract all my attention. None of us knew how to make a proper portfolio by then, so all we did was grab all of our drawings, put them into a folder, and presto! When I finally got the courage, I made an appointment and headed to the studio. It was a little office in downtown Buenos Aires.

## THE FIRST INTERVIEWS

I will never forget that interview with the art director of the studio. He grabbed my (so called) portfolio and turned a page, remained silent, turned another page, more silence and yet again more silence! In my mind, this took ages! When he finally spoke it was to say, “I like this page. It seems you have a very clean and smooth line for inking.” I was quite flattered, although of course I didn’t get the job. Another student from my art school got it, Leo Flores, a really good artist then and a huge artist now! I could never compete with his talent!

I wasn’t down for that episode, but it was useful for me to know that I wanted to do animation! Fortunately, a few months later, that same animation studio opened an animation course and they asked for portfolios in order to select the students. They were planning to teach animation, not drawing skills. So when I went, that interview lasted just a few seconds. Once again, the same art director came into the room; he looked at me and said, “Oh, I remember you and your portfolio! Of course you are in!” and left the room. Some weeks later the classes began. Lesson number one: the bouncing ball! And so on, going through all the basic exercises...

I eventually realized that all of these were oddly familiar to me, it made me wonder until one day I discovered the secret: without even noticing it, I had spent my entire childhood looking at my father’s art books, which included a book about animation. It was a correspondence course he had bought back in the late 50s when he was an aspiring young artist; it was at home for me to look at all the time. My father never got to be an artist. Instead, he preferred to work in my grandfather’s business. But somehow, and without any direct influence or suggestion from him, I followed the path he had abandoned.

## GETTING INTO THE BUSINESS

The animation classes went just fine for almost a year, until one day my teacher asked me to stay after class; he had to talk to me. After everybody else had left, my teacher finally said, “Look Pedro, we need a new inker, and I think you are our best choice. Would you like to start

working here with us? It is a fulltime job.” I guess my big smile said it all. That was the first time in my life I was in a situation where I just couldn’t say NO for anything in this world. **I can still remember how happy I was!** I rushed home to tell my parents about my new job. I still remember my father’s reaction when I told him I would be paid “20 pesos per second” – he almost had a heart attack! “My son is going to be a millionaire in no time!” he must have thought! I had to explain some details of the trade to him, and that I could only produce a few seconds a day... “Oh! I see... Anyway, it’s still good money, considering it’s your first job!” he finally said.

Now my job in animation was paying for my animation classes! Even better: **I had the chance to get to know everybody in the studio and talk to them about their work, their procedures, and learn from them. I was getting all that professional experience I could never get from books!**

## THE EMPTY STUDIO

In the meantime, there was a big animation studio called Manuel García Ferré, after the owner, that was opening back up to make a new feature film after many years of not doing any animation productions. That studio was a big opportunity for any Argentinean animator, so everybody in the field applied. It’s funny how someone’s misfortune can be an opportunity for others... This little studio I was working in ran out of animators! The whole team got better conditions (not to mention much more interesting work) in García Ferré Studio, so my boss was desperate! We had so much work to do and not a single animator in the studio! I had been working there for only a few months as ink line tracer when my boss asked me to come to his office. He said, “Pedro, do you feel confident enough to animate some shots?” “Yes, of course!” I said without even thinking about it. After getting out of that office, I did think about what I had just said and my legs trembled! The year was 1996, just a few weeks after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I felt like the luckiest guy in the world! Me, responsible for the animation of a shot, when I had been only a student less than a year ago... that was BIG!

## THE PATH TO BEING A REAL ANIMATOR

As you can imagine, my first shots were horrendous. I was struggling so hard to keep everything on model that I forgot all about movement and smoothness. Anyway, the scenes were approved, especially because there was no time for re-shots, and my work was finally aired a few days later: the opening for a well-known TV gossip show. I was still feeling on top of the world, having a dream job and learning big time (with so much effort)! But I also knew I had a very long road ahead of me if I wanted to become a good animator. I wanted to be Disney-good!

With all the “elders” gone, the small studio was run by my boss and a bunch of rookies like me! We were all so inexperienced, and we were all so eager to become the best artists we could that we became a really close team, and very good friends. Some of these guys I have the honor to call friends even now, like Pablo Navarro. The previous generation of animators in Argentina (the “Dinosaurs,” as I call them) has always been a very hermetic group. They never had the initiative to teach and develop the next generation of artists. We felt quite abandoned in those days, professionally speaking. In fact, all we had were books, videotapes of our favorite movies (no DVDs then!), and our sharp eyes to learn the tricks by watching! We would take up collections to make big orders from Amazon.com to get those books and videos we couldn’t find in the city. And of course, we had to learn English or else we were “out”! That was when we discovered two of the best books ever: **Ollie Johnston & Frank Thomas’ *The Illusion of Life* and Shamus Culhane’s *From Script to Screen* – in my opinion, a must-have for everybody who wants to work in the animation industry.**

A few years went by, doing many ads in a variety of styles and techniques, which was undeniably educational to us! We all worked in any step of the process to get the job done; if someone finished his animation first, he would ask everybody else if there were still shots undone. If not, he would start assisting and so forth until the final inking was done. It was great team work! After García Ferré’s feature film was finished, most of the crew moved to a big TV channel that was preparing a sitcom starring a cartoon character! That was quite original for Argentinean TV, and it had big expectations from the

public. The animation was going to be done by a studio called Patagonik Film Group. The series went really well, so we began working on lots of ads that starred cartoons as well! TV animation was in a new golden wave. That taught me a big lesson about this business: if one movie or series goes well, the whole animation “industry” wins. If it goes badly, we all lose. The audience’s feedback affects us all, creating somehow “feedback waves.” We are all part of one big industry. Think about it...

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Disney Studios had done more hits like *Tarzan* or *Lion King*. I bet the world’s 2D industry would be in a much better situation right now.

#### GETTING BIGGER

As the seasons went by, there were fewer backup chapters every week! The studio was having a hard time reaching the deadlines, and they had to ask for help from many minor studios, like ours – another big step for our little studio! As always, we did our best animating for that series, and that led the way to the next big step: the production of a fully animated TV series! It was a series about a family of penguins with a more adult sense of humor.

In order to handle that production, our studio and Patagonik Film Group entered a partnership and we all moved to the big studio; we were getting bigger! I tend to be too optimistic sometimes, and back then, I thought that being part of a big studio was a good change...I was wrong. That studio was big enough to make you lose communication with the rest of the areas; it felt like working in a factory. In addition, I had to make six seconds of animation per day; as you can imagine, all we could do was crappy animation! I wasn’t pushing the boundaries of my skills. I felt like I was animating on auto-pilot. Fortunately, the series did well enough to make a feature film. “That should be a relief for us!” I thought and I was right, in a way...

#### MY FIRST FEATURE FILM

For the feature film, we only had to do three seconds a day, with no consideration of any possible corrections. Thus, we had to do fifteen seconds of APPROVED material per week. Please allow me to expand on this: we had no line-test. We wouldn’t have had the time to make a line-test of a scene, anyway, even if we wanted to! The scene was made from animation to digital scanning, all blindfolded! That is, the director would take a look at the scene for the first time only a moment before it was painted. So if by any chance the director called an animator, it would be to give corrections, and if the scene was OK, no one was ever informed. All we had to make the scene work nicely were the X-Sheets and a stopwatch to determine the pace of every movement, and lots and lots of flipping the paper to get the feeling of the scene. It reminded me of the golden age at Disney, when doing a line-test meant waiting two weeks to get the film from the lab! The difference was that we were already in the digital era, only this time the limitations were time and money constraints.

**I would never want to work under those conditions again, but I have to admit it improved our skills and our self-confidence as animators more than any other method! I developed the strange ability to pass my pencil over an X-Sheet in exactly one second.** I can still stop a chronometer in one second sharp... well, most of the time! We worked like hell, doing long hours and working on weekends. But deep down in my heart, I knew it was great training.

The film was called *Los Pintín to the rescue*, just in case you want to see it. I finally understood that producers cared immensely about deadlines, and from that point of view, the movie was a production success! We finished it with not a single day of delay, which gave the studio the opportunity to start another feature film right away. The film was based on a comic book character that was well known in the country, so it was definitely going to be a hit. The production started under the same conditions as the previous one, but after four months of production, suddenly the project was suspended due to some legal stuff about the rights to the character, which I will never quite understand. The point is that all of a sudden we were all in the streets – no more studio and no more work for anybody.

## FACING FATE

As I said, I tend to be optimistic, and I took that situation as a chance to finish my education; I had been struggling to combine it with my work for all those years. So I started doing exactly that when, one day, I got a call from my good old friend Pablo Navarro. He said, "Pedro, I got an email from Spain. They're looking for animators for a new studio in order to make an animated feature film. I'm SO applying! Would you like to join me?" I have to admit that I didn't hesitate one single second. I responded, "But of course!" It might sound strange, but I knew in that very second that I was facing my destiny. I only wish everybody could have this type of experience at least once in their lifetime – it's an indescribable feeling to know with every cell of your body that you want something. I immediately quit the university and all I did for a month was prepare myself for the animation test they were going to send me over the internet. When they sent it to me, I did it twice! (The first version didn't convince me completely – I knew I could do better). A short while later, the response finally appeared in my inbox: I was hired for the job, and of course my friend Pablo was too! Soon after, in July 2001, we were traveling to Spain for our biggest adventure and (why not?) into the unknown. The film was *El Cid, the Legend* from Filmax Entertainment.

## COINCIDENCES ARE THE WAY GOD WORKS UNNOTICED

Let me tell you something about coincidences and signs. We arrived the day of Saint-Paul and Saint-Peter, which are our names in English: Pablo and Pedro. A few days before traveling, I had the most revealing dream: Pablo and I were about to enter a huge, dark, haunted house. Each of us was carrying a big backpack filled with...candy! Once we went in, we left the bags on the floor and continued on to investigate the place. And suddenly when we turned back, both bags were covered with rats, eating the contents. In the dream, we didn't care about the rats; we just went on exploring as happy as we could possibly be. I only understood the meaning of the dream much later. Indeed, after a couple of months, we realized that the money the studio was offering us was not good enough, and we had to do some other freelance jobs to pay the rent and buy food, yet we didn't care! We were so happy to be surrounded with new and more experienced animators that all we cared

about was being there and learning as much as we could. We didn't care about money (the candy), we just wanted to stay in that studio (the big house) to keep on learning. From that moment on, every time I dreamt of candy, an economical improvement came my way.

Fortunately, we arrived a few weeks before the animation work began, so we had the chance to get to know our animation director, Javier Martin, really well. (Another "coincidence": Pablo's second name is Martin, and my second name is Javier – Javier + Martin like our director!). At this point, I have to be really honest: when we got there, I had thought I knew how to animate, but the truth is that it wasn't until working there that I realized that I had a terribly long way to go to be good, and I loved that! Javier Martin was not only our director, I consider him my first and true mentor; I owe him so much...He would observe every scene to the minutest detail, and he wouldn't approve a scene until he considered it perfect. We all had to work really hard to meet his expectations, but after all, everyone has to work hard to learn, and even harder to improve.

## CRISIS EQUALS OPPORTUNITY ONCE AGAIN

The production was meant to be a year long, but we had so many delays that it took two years to finish. As you probably imagine by now, there was a moment when the director couldn't review all the scenes in progress at an acceptable pace. The studio was outsourcing scenes and/or sequences to several studios in Spain and all around the globe to finish on time. So after the first year of production, the producers made us both "an offer we couldn't refuse," as the Godfather would have said; they asked us to direct the animation of several sequences that the animation director felt suitable for us to lead. By that time, we were so in tune with the director's opinion that he felt we were ready to direct some sequences on our own under his general supervision. Another moment to remember for the rest of my life: the studio was recognizing all the hard work we did during that first year of work. By then, our pay had improved enough for us to live decently, so life was good, and by 2003, the film was finished. It was a hard working year, and the most educational year also.

My friend and I were the very first animators to step into that studio, and we also were the very last two people to leave the place. We had the keys to the studio; we virtually lived there for two years. By the time the animation work was done, the studio was planning to move to a new building, so I literally mean it when I say we were the last two to close the studio doors. I can still remember the last time we locked the door with the key, with our bags in our shoulders and headed to the elevator for the last time... I guess we did a good job after all: the director, Josep Pozo, immediately asked Pablo and me to co-direct the animation of his next film, *Nocturna*. Although we were really flattered by the offer, we felt so mentally tired after *El Cid* that we came to the conclusion that there was only one way we could accept the job: the money had to be really good. I don't know if I feel proud of the decision we made, but you have to understand that we were exhausted.

## JUMPING TO THE THIRD DIMENSION

We didn't reach an agreement, so Pozo made us another offer: to travel to Galicia, in the north-west of Spain, where there was the CGI studio owned by Filmax, Bren Entertainment. Another stroke of luck: by that time, I had already been thinking of getting into the CGI world for a long time, and now I was being offered the chance to learn while working there! The film was *Donkey-Xote*, a 3D parody to the famous Cervantes novel *Don Quijote de La Mancha*. The studio gave us a deadline to prove to them and to ourselves that we were capable of animating in 3D software. If after two months we hadn't learned enough of the animation tools, the contract would be cancelled immediately; we agreed and finally moved there – off on an adventure once again!

Bren Entertainment is a big, well-equipped studio, and most of the supervisors there were really talented. Everybody was really nice to us, and once again we learned quite a lot, especially in all the technical aspects. The thing is that after only two weeks of learning and practicing the animation tools, we were animating fluently. I'm not saying we were geniuses. If you know anything about 3D packages, you know that the animation tools are quite simple to learn. We spent almost one year there, just learning the tools, testing some rigs, doing a couple of

test animations, and helping with the development of a lip-synch system for the film characters by drawing mouth shapes for the modeling team to make, among other things. But after that entire year, the film was still far from beginning its production; the script was under correction over and over again, the characters were also constantly being redesigned. I started to feel stuck there. The city is incredibly beautiful, but really small, and after a year, I had memorized every street, every corner of it. I even started to recognize people in the streets I just crossed paths with over and over again. I needed a change of air.

I finally quit the job, leaving on the best terms, and with the promise that when the production was to ready to start, I would be notified in case I wanted to go back. Pablo Navarro, my partner, stayed there throughout this adventure; he is a fighter and he would never let any circumstance take him away from his dream.

#### BACK HOME

On May 1, 2004, I was back in Argentina. I first worked for a short period at a studio founded by a couple of friends of mine, called Hook Up Animation. I did a little bit of this and a little bit of that, nothing really big or serious... But after just a couple of months, executive producer Maria Laura Moure called me on the phone. She was from Patagonik Film Group, a studio I knew all too well – it was the producing studio of my first feature. She wanted to meet me, along with the film director, Juan Pablo Buscarini, to talk about a project they were planning. At first, I went to that meeting with the idea of being offered a job as traditional character animator; after all, that is what they had been doing all those years. But when he began to talk, things turned out to be much different, much better!

The film was *El Raton Perez*, also known as *The hairy tooth fairy*. In all of Latin America, and in some places in Europe, like Spain (the tradition differs from the English-speaking countries), instead of a fairy, it's a mouse that comes to trade a fallen tooth for a coin, or some money. The project was a mix of live action and CGI film (like *Stuart Little*, *Garfield*, and so many others), which interested me more than a 2D film and, best of all, I was offered the position of director of animation! Once again, I just couldn't say no to that. There was one last surprise for me that evening: the co-producing studio was Filmax Entertainment, from Spain. Apparently, they had been setting up the international deal for many months before, and because the euro was much stronger than the Argentinean peso, they had to balance the co-production by leaving all the main positions on the Argentinean side of the deal. I can imagine the dialogue they might have had:

- OK, we have the director, the cast and crew, the art director. Now we need to find an Animation Director, but who? It has to be someone who knows all the procedures of your studio in Spain...
- We had someone from your country working in our 3D studio not too long ago. He went back to Argentina. May be you know him. His name is Pedro Blumenbaum.
- Yes, I know him. He also worked for us many years ago. I'll try to contact him!

This is just from my imagination; I didn't attend that meeting. It's just to get the idea of how they came up with my name for that position. Finding me was not hard for Executive Producer Moure; after all, animation is a small business in Argentina and we all know each other very well. In December 2005, I left Hook Up studio. I had a meeting with them, and I explained why I was leaving so soon. The moment they heard of the offer, they understood it was an opportunity I couldn't let go.

#### ANOTHER DREAM

Sometime around then, I had another odd dream. I was in a city, a free interpretation of Buenos Aires maybe, the streets and sideways were incredibly wide and the buildings were spacious but with few floors. There was a huge park, with lots of trees and tidy grass. Everything was big. I was walking through these streets, and I went into one of the buildings. It looked like a library or some kind of a public building. I went to the lobby and took the elevator, but this elevator went up the building at top speed, not only up but also to the sides and down – it was more like a rollercoaster (it reminded me of the elevator in Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*). At the end of that wild ride, the elevator stopped on the first floor of the building where I had started out, and when the doors opened, I found myself in front of a huge candy shop! I didn't have to wait a single second to understand this dream's meaning: after all the traveling, all the adventures in Spain, the candy shop (my professional opportunities) was just one floor away from where I started.

#### NOW THE CIRCLE IS COMPLETE

At Patagonik, Mr. Buscarini made me another offer: to make the character designs, which I did gladly. A few months after pre-production and character designing, we had to fly to Santiago de Compostela. Does that date ring a bell? Yes, it had been exactly one year since I left that city – another “coincidence.” I had left as a character animator, and I was back as animation director; I just couldn't feel any more honored and grateful to my destiny.

#### HOW CAN I MAKE THE OCEAN A LITTLE SMALLER?

The problem that concerned me the most from the beginning of the pre-production was the distance between me and the animation crew. As animators, we understand that talking is not only what you say: how you say it and your body language while doing it are equally important. Communicating properly implies these three aspects and this, unfortunately, I learned the hard way. When Pablo and I had to make any corrections during the production of *El Cid*, all we had was written texts sent by mail to make ourselves understood. We had to explain movements with words – two completely different worlds. If “one image is worth a thousand words,” you can only imagine how much text we had to write to send in a simple correction!

We had to figure out a way to keep in constant touch with my team, and in the most organized and orderly fashion. I knew that the first instructions an animator gets from the director are the most important, and because of the distance, I couldn't rely on the 3D layout they were used to. Besides, layouts were also on my side of the co-production, but Patagonik had neither the equipment nor the team to make any of this. So I came up with an idea: make the layouts hand drawn. Even though it was a 3D film, making the layouts in good old 2D fashion had many

advantages. First, the expression of the characters was much better. The proxy models usually used as layouts were very stiff when it came to expressing any feelings. In fact, they didn't have any expression at all; all they would do was make a couple of poses along the timeline and rely heavily on the storyboard and the sound track. But this movie had very creepy storyboards; they were live-action storyboards. The drawings were just a quick reference for shooting the live shots; so I couldn't rely on it as reference. Another advantage to this method was that fewer artists were needed to do the job, and it could be composited into the live shot in no time. As a matter of fact, believe it or not, most of the layout work for the entire film was done by one person only: Federico Radero, another guy I met in my beginnings, a great artist and a very good friend of mine.

The procedure was the following: once the live action was shot in 36 mm, the film was digitalized and we picked some frames to print – a single print in the case of a steady shot, and a sequence of prints for a moving camera. After matching the printings with a specially made 2D field, the layout artist drew the character over a new sheet, using the print underneath as guide to make it the right place, size, and perspective. All the drawings were scanned afterwards, painted in Toonz (just

plain white) and then composited into the digitalized shot. If necessary, compositing artists would pan or scale the drawings in order to make the action clearer; the resulting layout was a Quicktime file, which was sent to the animation team overseas. They just had to import it to their working area, along with the match-move 3D scene with the proxies, and match the 3D character to the layout.

Another thing that concerned me was the correction workflow for the shots. Bren Studio had validating software that was very useful and clear, but it was based on written text. I needed to be able to communicate more closely with the team. The solution: I captured my monitor and my voice as I commented and corrected every scene, just like a video tutorial from the internet. Sometimes, I shot myself or someone else from the studio to make the reference as clear as I could. Then, instead of uploading a text, I sent another Quicktime file.

Both ideas worked very well, and the production continued this way until the end. In July 2006, the film premiered and it was quite a success in Argentina. In fact, a sequel was released in January this year. But I didn't work on that.

## NOW LET'S SAIL!

Right after *El Raton Perez*, I was asked to direct the animation of a 2D feature film that was already in production. Yes, that wasn't a mistake: the film was already in production. I will just say that the previous director and producers did not understand each other, so the director stepped down. The film was *The Ark*, a parody about the biblical story of Noah's ark. The production was on its way, and I had to climb on board as the ship was sailing. I remember how I was the only one who couldn't remember the characters' names those first days of work – funny, considering that I was the director! The production was really difficult. There were too many script corrections over animatics that were already done, and too many editing corrections over animated scenes, and yet so little time to do it all. I like to value every job I do by its learning component, and in this film, I learned some big lessons. **A good production team is as important as the artistic team; no matter how solid your crew of artists is, if the production design doesn't fit the circumstances, then the production will fail.** Anyway, the film was finished and premiered, but it didn't do that well. The studio was falling apart, the shareholders were selling their shares, and new owners were coming in (all political stuff I don't completely understand). The point is that Patagonik was not a good place to be at that time. Just for the record, *El Raton Perez 2* was the last film it made before the studio closed.

## THE MEXICAN CONNECTION

A couple of years before, while I was working on *El Raton Perez*, Hook Up Animation did a movie for a Mexican license, Huevocartoon. That studio did not have the knowledge or the infrastructure to make a feature film. All they had done at that moment was a lot of Flash animations for their website, and jumping to the big screen was a very big leap to do on their own, so they hired the services of Hook Up Animation to do the work. The film was *Una pelicula de huevos*, which means "A movie about eggs," and it was a huge success in Mexico. The solid script and its irreverent humor made it connect with Mexican audiences right away, even though the technical aspects were not so polished.

So by the time I was leaving Patagonik, Huevocartoon was planning to make a sequel, only this time they were not partnering with Hook Up to do the animation. They were planning to open their own studio in Buenos Aires: Mama Gallina Animation or Mamma Chicken Animation (quite an embarrassing name...that's why we call it MG Animation!). The studio managed to gather very good artists to take the supervising positions. It helped us all build our confidence in the project. So in September 2007, I went with a group of people to Mexico City to start the storyboards, and a couple of months later, we came back to the brand new studio in Buenos Aires. I must say that I had the greatest time during this production. The studio gave me the opportunity to participate actively in all the production issues from day one, which I really appreciated, especially in a production like this one where designing the right workflow was crucial. I was not only involved in animation direction, but I was also in charge of managing and coordinating the different teams and stages

over time and through partial deadlines. There is an old saying that goes "One hundred monks, one hundred religions." I would say "One hundred employees, one hundred problems!" Having to deal with all kinds of personal problems from the crew was sometimes exhausting, but all in all, I loved that job. In fact, I discovered that I wouldn't mind doing that as a fulltime job.

As is to be expected, we had many production issues and adjustments to the schedules, but in the end we did a tidy job. We did very long hours and lots of hard work to finish the film on schedule. Above all, we did it with a much higher quality than the previous film. Fortunately we had a bullet-proof compositing team and a great art direction team who gave the whole movie a very refined look. The movie also has several crowded scenes that were done in CG, as well as many 3D vehicles and props. On December 9, 2008, the last scene was approved. As I am writing this, *Otra pelicula de huevos, y un Pollo* has not been released, but it is expected to open in theaters on March 23, 2009, in Mexico. The film is going through the lab and copying stages right now. I am keeping my fingers crossed on how the audience will receive it, although I am confident it is going to do really well. Hopefully there will be a third part...

In the meantime, I'm getting some vacation, and from time to time helping my friend Federico Radero on the development of his project, *October, the Cat*. He is the guy who did all the layouts by himself for *El Raton Perez*. Besides that, I have so many projects and ideas, my mind is about to explode with them. But in the long term, I'm attracted to the idea of helping to shape the next generation of animators. Raising the bar for the animators of this region is crucial to developing the local market. As such, it is my new goal to make Latin American animation grow, one scene at the time! I hope you had as much fun reading this as I had writing it!

So far I'm still waiting to have another revealing dream about my future! But now that I think of it, may be this time I'm dreaming while awake...After all, I'm just following my dreams!

Cheers!

# WORKFLOW

I WOULD  
RECOMMEND  
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FROM TIME  
TO TIME, TOO.

## WORK PROCESS

Well, I guess that it all starts with reading the script, preferably more than once. When I was studying filmmaking, I was taught that you have to see a movie at least three times in order to be ready to analyze it. Well, I think that reading the script at least twice is mandatory to have all the actions fresh in your mind as you work. I would recommend watching the animatic from time to time, too.

## SECOND: KNOW YOUR DIRECTOR

It's a simple statement, but it means a lot to me. He is not only the person who determines whether or not your scene is ok, he is the person who determines the style and quality standards of the film, so he is someone to be listened to. When it's time to get his briefing, I try to understand his way of thinking, and not only his instructions for that particular scene. For instance, haven't you noticed that movies directed by Mark Dindal are more "over-acted" (in the positive sense) than movies led by Glenn Keane? I'm quite sure it has something to do with their personalities! *Cats don't dance* is proficient in squash and stretch of the characters, with (almost) no extra keys or moving holds, and everything is mainly "snappy"; it is only logical to assume that the animators worked mainly on a pose-to-pose basis. On the other hand, there is *Tarzan*, with long moving holds, and everything aiming to be more "realistic" in terms of movement; you don't see Tarzan scrambling in place before he runs. It is a fact that these two pictures have very different tones: one is a musical-comedy and the other is a drama with musical interstitials. But what would have happened if Keane had directed *Cats don't dance*, and Dindal *Tarzan*? I'm positive that their personal styles would have affected the end result.

So, if you "get into your director's mind" every time he explains a scene, and as long as the production moves on, you'll get to a point where you can sort of "predict" his instructions and know in advance whether your scene is going in the right direction or not. After all, he is the person the studio has put faith and trust in to imprint quality on the film. I try to pay very close attention to him. Under normal circumstances, the production doesn't go in chronological order, so it is hard to get into the correct mood for the character. You have to keep in mind that your character will evolve during his journey (everyone should read Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* about the hero's path!). Only after I obtain all the necessary instructions from my director, and I'm set for the tone, the action, the length of the scene, and the time I have to finish it can I start working...never before! Believe me when I say that if you think half, you work double – another lesson learned from big mistakes!

Sometimes making a single scene is similar to making a whole movie; it also has its pre-production, production, and post-production stages. Pre-production would be retrieving all the references and notes to animate the scene. Production, well, is animation, and post-production is the tie-down and everything related to "packaging" the scene for the next stage, depending on whether it's a 2D or 3D workflow. Like in making a movie, the pre-prod of a scene is the key to success. I feel there are no rules to get the correct reference, because it mainly depends on the nature of the scene itself. What I have discovered is that "social" actions, like sitting on a chair, shaking another person's hands, and all those kinds of actions are good to be shot with your camera. Those are actions that won't differ greatly for any kind of biped character. But when it comes to action scenes, references are not to be trusted 100%. Why do I say this? Well, I think it depends on your physical condition; if you are an athlete, your reference will be quite accurate, but if you are a regular person (like most of the people in animation), your movements will be quite different from what your "superhero" character would do. Your characters would be more precise in their movements, and they would probably do that same action with much less effort. For those cases, I try to get some clips of Olympic athletes, for instance. At times, your character's action is impossible to do in real life, like a superhero fighting the villains at the climax of the movie (I can't wait to read what Ana Maria Alvarado wrote about her experience animating *Spiderman*!).

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## ANIMATING IS ACTING

If I was given a scene like that, I would have tried good old “follow through” animation to start, because I would consider that “the body knows.” Allow me to explain this term: a few years ago, I took some acting classes – nothing serious, just some improvisation techniques and body language exercises. Over time, I came to the conclusion that animators are actors. This might sound quite obvious, but I know lots of animators who have never taken any acting classes. I understood that not only do we draw ourselves all the time, we also animate accordingly. If the animator is shy, in his scenes the character’s movements will be slower and more subtle than in the scenes drawn by a more extroverted animator. As a director, I would give the shy animator the acting scenes, the kind of scenes where the audience should feel the inner process of the character, and I’d give the action scenes to the extroverted animator. (This is generally speaking, of course). I remember a tiny little exercise I proposed to the people on my team when I was working on *Los Pintin to the rescue*. My teammembers were Julian, a skinny, long-haired guy, Lorena, a chubby, short girl, and Gustavo, a fat, old, bearded guy. I asked them to draw a face, just a face, no more instructions than that. Julian did a male face with long hair and the tongue out, like a hell’s-angel motorcycle guy, Lorena did a round-faced female with a mild smile on her face, and Gustavo did a round funny face with short hair. It was so obvious for me: everybody draws himself or herself. When I told them about this, they disagreed. “This is not me!” said Julian right away. But I meant the inner self not the exterior.

Let me rephrase the idea. In class, I’ve been taught that the body can think by itself. For instance, when you walk, you don’t have to be conscious about your feet, and where to place them next with every step you do. Or when something suddenly hits you hard or trips you, you fall to the ground. Your limbs simply know how to react to that impulse, and cushion the landing instinctively. I think that’s why athletes or martial artists practice their movements so often, so that their bodies know what to do without having to think about it. I would also add to this that body movements are ruled by “the law of the minimum effort.” The foot lifts from the floor only enough to step forward and then lands on the ground once again. Or the arms move only as much as it takes to maintain the balance of the body. To sum up: follow through would be my first choice for that scene, but the bottom line is that in order to make any convincing scene, I would probably use all tricks and sources I can get. Maybe I would shoot some reference footage doing that action anyway – and have a lot of fun doing it – and then I would try to deduce what to use and what to discard from that reference.

After I have all my references, there is one last preliminary step before animating. I have discovered that I can’t just open the video reference in one window and the 3D software in the other and copy the movement just like that. First, I need to make some thumbnails – not only because I like to keep drawing, but to under-

stand what I’m about to animate. I want to know why the arms move like they do, or why that foot suddenly moves a little to the side, etc. **You can’t imagine how many little movements (unconscious ones) we do all the time to maintain balance, to compensate an effort in another part of the body, or simply because the body gets bored and wants to change positions.** This is closely related to what I said about knowing the director, because if you fully understand what is happening in that video reference, you will get to incorporate that knowledge the next time.

When I’m finally animating, my first approach is the same whether it is 2D or 3D. I first make the main poses, and then try to find their place in the timeline. In the case of 2D, I keep the layout underneath the papers I’m drawing in order to keep my rough as much on model as I can by flipping. In 3D, I don’t have that issue, but I pose it, without paying attention to the smaller details like the hands or face, just the rough pose. In fact, I work on the face much later on. If your character moves convincingly with the dialogue he’s saying, you know you are on the right path, and adding the mouth just completes your work, so to speak.

Other than that, my workflow is quite traditional: adding more and more poses in order to describe every subtlety of the acting until I’m satisfied with the scene. In the case of 3D, I use the regular technique of putting every key frame on columns at first, and then reducing the key frames and polishing the curves as a final stage. That is, setting a key frame on every one of the character’s joints every time I set it in a new pose, so that I can grab the entire column of key frames later and move it in the timeline effortlessly and, most important, without taking the risk of changing the pose. When I was at Bren Entertainment, they made me study Keith Lango’s webpage about this technique. Most of the time I work with the curves set on linear. This way, I can see more clearly where I need to add more key frames to better describe an arc of movement.

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If I'm trying to make some follow through in 3D, I do it "on 2s" anyway—that is, setting key frames on the odd frames, one key every two frames. This is because I am used to feeling the right timing in 2D, which is usually set "on 2s" (12 frames a second). Anyway, I understand that doing follow through animation in 3D is quite rare, and the resulting scene may look quite shaky. I've noticed that in 3D, smoothing the curve to its best is much more important than what it might seem in the previews. It has happened to me several times that a scene looked ok in the playblast (the preview in Maya), but afterwards, in the final render, it looked shaky anyway! Even the most insignificant detail overlooked in curves can mean an error on the screen. According to the way CG animation is approached, it seems that a pose-to-pose method could be more suitable, but as Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas always say, the best way is to combine the two methods!

**For 2D animation, I shoot my drawing over and over again, adding more and more drawings to describe all arcs, all secondary actions, all overlaps. Most of the time, adding more detail means redrawing the previous work; it's a constant tweaking of the movement.** This usually means that my scenes have almost all drawings done by me, which is not so cool for my weekly production rates! I also tend to think about the assistant that comes next, so I try to make everything as on model and as clean as I can.

#### I'VE NEVER USED 2D LAYOUT!

That's right. In a 2D production, I have never used a layout! And I'm proud of what I do! (What a statement!?) This might sound much more controversial than it actually is. Of course, if the character has to be sitting, I do not draw it standing. By not using the layout, I mean that I do not trace it on a new sheet and use it as a key frame. This is related to what I mentioned about the constant tweaking of the drawings during the animation process. So by the time I finish the scene, that layout pose has been through several adjustments to fit the movement. There is an obvious exception: TV series animation. In this kind of production, I follow the layout as a golden rule. What I do find quite useful is tracing the layout again on a new piece of paper and analyzing the construction volumes, even though I do it before I start to animate as a way of warming up my hand. By seeing so much, you start to go blind!

**Sometimes I'm so into my scene that there comes a moment I simply don't know whether what I'm doing is ok or not. I watch the scene over and over again until I just can't tell what I'm doing. My eyes start to "accept" the scene as it is, so my head starts to doubt the result. In those cases, I ask for the opinion of another animator** —this is teamwork, after all! Anyway, this is how I usually approach a scene. But after all these years, I've learned that not only is every scene and production different, but I am not the same every day either. It's natural. We are artists, after all, and we depend quite a lot on our mood too. So, maybe one day one technique works better than the other. Pablo and I used to laugh about it. We would say, "Hmm, this Col-Erase pencil is not working today. I will give this thick black crayon a try," and then, "Oh! This one is working just fine today!"

If you are professional enough, you'll get to know yourself well enough to determine what kind of day you are having. Maybe it's a day for planning, and maybe it's for animating non-stop till 2 AM. I just make sure that I'm doing what I'm in the mood for. After all, deadlines have to be respected, no matter my mood, and I know that I can't waste the studio's time.

#### MANAGING MY "ADDICTIONS"

When I started animating in 3D, I just loved the possibility of orbiting the camera all the time. I spent too much time tweaking the pose over and over again, every time from a different and new angle. I would always find a new angle where the pose should be corrected; **I wanted to make the character in a perfect pose from all angles. I could say that I became addicted to orbiting the camera! But after a while, I realized that the character's pose only has to be optimized for the camera (because everything is related to the silhouette and negative space techniques) and I came to the conclusion that the only angle that counts is the camera – the camera rules!** So if the pose is not perfect from another angle, I just don't care. On the other hand, sometimes orbiting the camera gives me the answer to a strange pose I can't perfect.

Another "addiction" was to render a playblast every two minutes, just because I could. The fact that I could immediately see the progress of my work became an addiction to me and again I eventually realized how much time I wasted rendering those previews. In order to save time, **I started making a mental list of corrections between renders, and I wouldn't make any new playblasts until all the corrections were done. Just by doing this, I increased my productivity quite a lot. "Hello, my name is Pedro, and it's been three months since I last made a useless playblast" ...just kidding!**

### MANAGING THE ENERGY

While working on *The Ark*, I used to ask the animation team to “manage the energy.” For me, that means not wasting time on details that are not going to be seen, and not spending too much time on a scene that is very short and simple.

Please consider the pressure I was under to ask the team to do this – the production was so far behind schedule that I had to do some “damage control,” and this was to reduce working hours on less important scenes and on the less important animations (just like an MP3 file reduces the file size without sacrificing too much quality). This was all the more important after the first main plot point in the story since the action then usually becomes more based on dialogue so the animation quality can be lowered slightly. By the second main plot point, the action has captured the audience (hopefully), and once again quality can be more tempered. The first and last acts, on the other hand, should be spotless.

Managing the energy also means that it is not a good idea to spend long hours at work at the beginning of the production, so that energy can be saved up for the last months when the deadline is chasing us. Of course, that concept came back to me like a boomerang; many times an animator would come and say, “Well, I didn’t put too much effort into this scene. I wanted to manage my energy!”

### FINAL LESSONS I’VE LEARNED

I’ve caught myself many times trying to improve too much from one scene to the other; I wanted to go from rookie to ace in just one scene. But after so many trials, this only made me suffer. There is always something you can improve in your scenes, and if you don’t let it go at the right moment, it becomes an endless task. **Getting better is all about saving little bits of experience as the scenes go by. I have come to understand that developing your skill takes huge amounts of time and effort. So it’s better to be patient, to be constant in managing the energy, and most important of all, to love what you do, because if you don’t, the price of being a good animator is too high.**

### LEARNING NEVER ENDS

All of what I have presented here is based on my opinions and beliefs on how to deal with a scene. Everybody is welcome to disagree. After all, this is animation – it is supposed to be fun and relaxed. We are not dealing with rocket science. Animation is art and entertainment, and we all have different ways of seeing, approaching and understanding it. If you are an aspiring animator, just go for it! There is nothing that determination can’t achieve, no matter your nationality, your age, or sometimes even your education! **If you are a working animator, I just hope that my thoughts have connected to your experience, and hopefully made you think of the way you handle a scene.**

All I wanted to do was to share my beliefs and some philosophical views with you. As for the more technical stuff, I trust that you will find some really useful tips on animating from the rest of the people on this book, whom I consider to be much more talented than I am. I know their work, and they all have my admiration. As for me, I’m just grateful to be part of this.

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# ANTHEA KEROU



## BIOGRAPHY

Anthea was born in New Jersey, and grew up near the New York area. She went to Montclair State University and graduated with a BA in Fine Arts in 2001. During her undergraduate years, she spent a year abroad at the University of Reading, England, where she met many great friends and backpacked all around Europe. After returning to the US, she attended New York University and received a Masters of Science in Digital Arts. At this time, she decided to become an animator and joined the very first class of Animation Mentor. Shortly after joining AM, she moved to Los Angeles, and only seven months later, she landed her first animation job at Walt Disney Feature Animation as an assistant animator on *Meet the Robinsons*. She moved back to NYC to work as an animator on *Horton Hears a Who* at Blue Sky Studios. Then she returned to Walt Disney Animation Studios and animated on *Bolt*. She decided to travel the world a bit more and vacationed in Greece, Egypt, and Jordan before working in Madrid, Spain, at Ilion Animation Studio on Sony's *Planet 51*. After returning from Spain, Anthea returned to Los Angeles to work on the film *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* at Sony Animation Studios. Currently, Anthea is animating at Dreamworks animation studios in Los Angeles, on the film *Shrek 4*. The adventure continues!

## WORKFLOW

Every animator has their own process; I am still experimenting and trying to learn all I can from others. In my case, preparing to work on an assigned scene begins on my first day. If the movie has already been in production for a while before my arrival, then it's important to see the whole movie in its current state to understand the story and the character's arcs and motivations. It's also important to see the scenes that have already been animated of each character and talk to the lead or supervisors about the style of animation and personality of each character. Even within one movie, many characters may have a different style of acting, and the director may want different results. For instance, in *Planet 51*, Skiff is more cartoony while Lem is far more realistic.

If the movie has many influences from a specific genre, you can watch some of those movies for reference. For example, *Planet 51* is reminiscent of the classic 1950s sci-fi movies, so watching some of those may help you. After you've been assigned a shot from a sequence, it is important to watch that sequence again more closely, and specifically the shots surrounding yours. In an effort to ensure a smooth continuity of the shots, you need to be clear on the staging for hook up purposes,

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whether a character is moving throughout the scene or is holding an object in a certain hand and so on. You should meet with your lead, or the lead of the main character you will be working on, to discuss the shot, and, if possible, you should receive your assignment from the director, since they are the final decision-makers and it's important to know what they want. I also think about the dialogue, how the character is feeling, and the place in the sequence. Is this a slow, calm part of the sequence? Is it building to something? Or is it a frenzied moment? All these details will affect how you approach your planning.

**The planning phase shouldn't take that long, between a few hours and a few days depending on the length of the shot.** If your animated character is based on a real actor, then watching the films or TV shows they were featured in is a good place to start for inspiration. This doesn't mean you should copy the performance of the actor! The animation will come out better if the acting choices are true to your animated character's unique personality and true to the situation they are currently facing in your shot. I don't usually plan my shots out in 2D first. This used to be more helpful to me a few years ago when most of my tests tended to be more cartoony, but lately I've become more interested in subtle, authentic, realistic animation, and I find reference is a better tool for me.

Many animators don't film reference and some are even against it, but for me it is a great place to start. I can quickly act out a few ideas and review them on tape to see what is working or what is interesting. Then I can take parts I like and throw out the rest, or re-film it if necessary with different staging or motivation. If you yourself aren't comfortable acting out in front of a camera, don't be shy about asking a coworker

for help. I have lent a hand to fellow coworkers who needed help filming reference: I've been Penny from *Bolt* and Neera from *Planet 51* many times, and it's a fun part of your job to work together as a team and help in any way possible. We all want the movie to turn out the best it can be, so we help out however we can.

I have a very involved tactic to prepare for acting out my reference; it obviously depends on the type of shot. What emotions or physicality are you portraying? For a shot I had in *Bolt* where Penny had been running and was quite upset and out of breath, I set up the reference room beforehand with the camera in the correct angle and my audio ready, and then I actually ran up and down the stairs a few times before bursting into the room to shoot the reference. **Some people might laugh at my "method animation" technique, but I think it's important to feel what the character is feeling in order to act authentically.**

Another way to do this is to really understand the subtext of the lines. Most of the time there is a hidden meaning behind what they are saying. You can break it down to beats and decide what the subtext is, then try to relate it to your life by thinking of a time when you felt that way. It sounds like a lot of preparation, but I think it is worth it for the experience and practice of tapping into a character's emotions. I find it helpful to learn acting techniques. I've taken improvisation classes in NYC and Los Angeles, and attended an acting school in Los Angeles as well. I really enjoyed the acting school, even when not participating myself by acting in a scene on stage. Getting to watch the other acting students perform their scenes and take direction from the teacher was a great learning experience. I plan to continue these types of classes when I am back in LA.

After I've edited down to a few takes, I show them to some coworkers or to my lead. I might also show the director my reference before blocking it out. Showing it to the director can save you a lot of time, especially if you are unclear about the shot or the staging. Then I begin blocking my character. A good rule is not to invest too much time before showing the director your first pass blocking. It's important for him to see it at an early stage so that things can be changed if need be without wasting too much time.

Workflow is a tricky subject. For me it is always evolving, since I only have a few years' experience in features so far. It just takes practice, and the most important thing is to listen in the dailies when your shot is being reviewed and try to give the director what he is asking for. After the blocking is approved, it is a pretty straightforward approach that I'm sure most animators use: they begin adding detail and more poses in until they have refined it enough to look at the animation on 1s in linear or spline. This is when it seems to all fall apart for most people. The animation is at its ugliest and the computer has shown you what's been hiding in the inbetweens. At this point, I tend to focus on the hips and torso and begin cleaning and smoothing the arcs, which usually means deleting lots of keys. But it is important to continue to show your work to your fellow animators constantly during the entire process so they can point out the mistakes and areas for improvement that you may have missed. Since everyone has a different area of strength, having a second or third set of eyes looking over your shots will only improve it.

**When you do have the good fortune to be working at a feature animation company, you should try to learn as much as you can from all the coworkers and fellow animators around you.** Ask them for help as much as possible, for acting reference, advice on workflow, or to look at your shot and give you their opinions. Many of the people you are working with now will move on to other companies and you will probably run into them again, so it's important to show respect and have good relationships with them. The greatest lesson I have learned from animation is about humility. This is something I noticed when I first became involved in this industry as a student in Animation Mentor. Showing humility and being eager to learn from everyone around you is an important skill. It's your job to seek out help and help others. Never think you know it all because when you stop trying to learn, your work will stagnate and you'll no longer grow as an artist. If someone is better than you, there's no reason to be upset or feel down about your work. In fact, that is the exact person you should be talking to as much as possible, so you can benefit from the knowledge they have gained over their years of experience and you can become a better animator.

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# GABRIELE PENNACCHIOLI



# BIOGRAPHY

Gabriele was born in Origgio, a small village near Milan in Italy. He went to school at the Liceo Artistico and Accademia di Belle Arti. He has lived in Milan, London, Munich, Copenhagen and Los Angeles. Gabriele started his career as a comic book artist, drawing for *Diabolik*, *Intrepido*, and *Dylan Dog*, all published in Italy.

In 2001, he wrote and directed the animated short *The Shark and the Piano*, which received several awards at film festivals all over the world. He also worked as a visual development artist on Walt Disney's *Fantasia 2000*. Gabriele has also worked in Europe as an animator, character designer and story artist on numerous feature-lengths, including *Help! I'm a Fish*, *Eight Crazy Nights* and *The Jester Till*.

Gabriele Pennacchioli joined DreamWorks Animation in 2003 as a lead animator on *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. He went on to work as an animator on *Shark Tale*, *Flushed Away*, *Kung Fu Panda* and as a story artist on *Shrek the Third* and *Crood Awakening*. He has self-published two books: *Animal Blog* and *The Young Minotaur*.

Gabriele is currently working as an animator on *How To Train Your Dragon*.

I NEED TO KNOW THE CHARACTERS,  
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THEIR MOTIVATIONS,  
WHERE THEY COME FROM AND  
WHERE THEY ARE GOING.

# WORKFLOW

## UNDERSTANDING THE MOVIE

Before I start working as an animator on any project, I need to know as much as possible about the story, the theme and the director's vision. I need to know the characters, their personalities and their motivations, where they come from and where they are going.

## KNOWING THE SHOT

The director's handout provides me with all the information I need about my shot. Getting to know the dialogue (if any) and the action is the first step. I watch the shot in the context of the sequence. I look for continuity between my shot, the shot before and the one after. If one of those shots has already been animated, I need to be sure my acting/action will hook up properly. I also pay attention to the layout, props and any technical challenges that might arise. A good example of this is the sequence on the bridge in *Kung Fu Panda*. In those scenes, the characters had to interact with a moving bridge. So it was crucial to figure out a system to control the bridge and the characters at the same time. Knowing the shot could require some additional research too. Let's say I have a fish character and I haven't animated one before. I go and do some research. I study the behavior, mechanics and anything else that can help me to better animate/understand the character.

## WORKING ON THE SHOT

Now that I know what the shot is about, I can concentrate on how I'm going to do it. I explore different ideas, trying to figure out the best acting/action possible. I might draw little sketches or try to act out the scene in front of a mirror or camera. **Acting goes hand in hand with staging and composition, so I'm always aware of the camera and how the scene will look on the screen.**

## FIRST PASS (BLOCKING)

In my first animation pass, I concentrate on the mechanics. Usually, I shoot video references which I study thoroughly. I work out the main body poses, I check the timing, and then I add the facial expressions. In some cases, I work in "layers." This means that I animate the body first, then the legs, the arms and finally the head. This was often the case for the fish in *Shark Tale*. If the shot has more than one character, I usually start with the one that leads the acting/action. Then I animate the other one so that the secondary character is reacting to what the lead character is doing.

## FEEDBACK

I show my first pass to my supervisor (if I have one) and/or to the director when I feel it is ready for review.

## FINALIZING THE SHOT

The last step is to address any notes I have received and to finalize the shot. At this stage, I make sure that the acting/action reads the best way possible, that the arcs and spacing work nicely, and that the weight of the character is right. **I like to check my animation from different camera points of view (side, front and top). This helps me find and correct some mistakes that are difficult to spot from my working camera view. I might also go in and add some small movements that I feel will enhance the overall performance.** Unless I have a simulation system that automatically animates hair, tail or clothing (and this wasn't the case on *Shark Tale* and *Flushed Away*), I leave the dragging, overlapping and follow-through animation until the very end.

MATT

STRANGIO



# BIOGRAPHY

Matt Strangio grew up in the high desert of Southern California, saw *The Empire Strikes Back* when he was 5, and was forever driven by his desire to work with “movie magic.” But it wasn’t until he had taken some animation classes at UCLA that he homed in on his ultimate goal of becoming an animator. After graduating in design and working for a number of years in web design and dabbling in animation long enough to scrounge up the courage to try it for a career, he entered animation via gaming for Electronic Arts. While working there, his off-hours were filled as a charter member of the newly formed online animation school, Animation Mentor, and followed with visual fx jobs at both ILM and Tippett Studio. He now animates at Pixar Animation Studios, where he loves being challenged and inspired on a daily basis.

# WORKFLOW

## HOW DO I WORK AS AN ANIMATOR

I’ve always liked to imagine that if Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo were alive in contemporary times, they’d be animators. Because animation takes into account so many different artistic disciplines and uses them to imbue performances that, when done well, conjure emotions or reactions in the viewer, not unlike the art created by those masters of the Renaissance. **Design, anatomy, contrast, appeal, being able to direct the viewer’s eye – all working together in time. These elements can work so well together to create believable characters who can, in their own right, breathe, and think, and live, and have their own dreams, and their own fears. It’s a fun way to make a living!**

## HOW DO I ANIMATE

Well, I believe there’s a process, and then there’s an understanding. The process – my process, my workflow – has and continues to change all the time. It changes depending on the type of shot, the type of character, the number of characters, the schedule, etc. But it all starts with a solid understanding of what you’re trying to accomplish by all this animation.

## UNDERSTANDING

So where do you start? The best advice I can give is to really get into the head of the character, at that specific point in their life. You have to know what that character was just doing and how they were feeling, and you have to know where they are about to go and what they will be feeling once they get there. All that analysis helps you imagine in your own mind “What would they do here? What are they thinking? How are they feeling?” Ollie Johnston said it perfectly: “What is the character thinking, and why does he feel that way?”

So once you have a good idea of the character at that moment, how do you come up with the appropriate acting choices to portray that?

## ACTING CHOICES

Well, that's really up to the director and up to you as the actor. There should be obvious guidelines to certain characters, especially if they are already known and have well developed personalities already. But within that realm, you as the actor need to put yourself in the point of view of that character, at that specific point in their life. You need to know their general personality, but everything should depend on the situation that they're currently in.

Once you really get your mind in the character in that way, then you should be free to come up with any other unique flavors you can add to the mix, which will first and foremost help to specifically communicate what the character should be doing in that scene, but also maybe help the character feel that much more believable and alive in their world. \*Spoiler Alert\* Here is a recent, simple example. In *Up*, there's a scene with young Ellie showing young Carl her Adventure Book, and she does this little thing during a moment of pause, of touching her thumb against her teeth before moving on to the next page or whatever. I don't know, but to me, there was something amazing about that! It was such a simple, unique choice, but made her feel *so* much more alive in that world. Was it already in the storyboards? Or did the animator (Guillermo Jacinto) notice a little kid or someone do that before and put that into his animation? Did he do that himself once, or in a reference take? Or did he really get into the head of this character at this moment in her life and imagine "I know her. That's probably something she would do..." I don't know the exact answer (I'll have to ask him now!), but for me, that kind of little unique choice is amazing and really helps make that character so much more believable! Whatever the reason, he came up with the choice that young Ellie would have done something like that in her present situation, so he went with it, and it delivered!

Not all shots allow for those kinds of moments, but that should never keep you from really trying to think in those terms and explore those ideas. And of course, if the shot calls for a somewhat "standard delivery" of a performance, you'll always have the fallback of your leads, your fellow animators, and the director, to help steer you on the correct course to really make choices that are consistent with the character.

As for characters that have never been animated before – for me, now that's the real fun stuff! Because now, you have an opportunity to help define that character. You can begin to infuse all those little traits and all those little bits that make up their personality. More often than not, you'll have a director who already has a well developed idea of what the character should be and how they should act/react to situations at hand, but *how* they do it – sometimes that is entirely up to you!

When you hear directors in interviews give advice to animation students about what they should do to get into the animation business and you often hear an answer something like, "You need to experience life and bring those experiences into your animation." I'm paraphrasing here, but I've heard Brad Bird say this in a number of interviews. So for a situation I just described where a character is somewhat of a "blank slate" in terms of their personality or how should they move and act, here is where you can have the best opportunity to bring in a bit of yourself, your experiences, little behaviors you've noticed in people while sitting on the bus and watching them – whatever! This is the opportunity to tap into all those things you've been accumulating over your lifetime and who knows, maybe help define a character with those traits that are unique to your experience.

## ACTING CHOICES VS. PERFORMANCE

In all this exploration of acting choices and getting into the mind of the character, whatever choices you come up with must fit within the needs of the shot/scene. For instance, **you may come up with this really clever and unique acting choice which cracks up everyone in the room, but if that's not the objective of the shot, it's no good. In other words, maybe the audience should be paying attention to the main character, but this unique acting choice by the guy on screen right is drawing everyone's eye away from the main character.** This is a failure because it's detrimental to the objective of the shot. So in that case, it is not a good choice. And as hard as it may sound, a good animator has to accept that, recognize why, and be willing to do what is best for the shot by taking out that really funny and unique acting choice. Maybe it'll work somewhere else another day, maybe not...

So getting the most inspired performances in your characters, I think, means achieving that right balance of good, unique acting choices and fulfilling the needs of the shot. When you've done these things in a way that brings more out of the character than the director and everyone else initially thought was possible – making them and the world more believable – then I think you've created an inspired animated performance.

But it's tough, and you can't win them all. Some amazing animators seem to give performances like this on a regular basis, while others maybe once in a blue moon. Frank Thomas said that he felt he had only created maybe five great shots or performances in his career. Wow, right?! Of course, the standards he set for himself were probably very high, but he definitely knew what he was going for and what he recognized as a truly inspired and successful performance. Wherever that truth may lie, working hard towards those truly great performances is definitely key as an animator.

## MY PROCESS, MY WORKFLOW

### Planning

It really can't be emphasized enough. There's nothing that makes a shot more difficult and unnecessarily devours more time than not planning the shot well from the beginning. So I usually both draw thumbnails and shoot reference. Sometimes each of these gives me ideas that I hadn't originally thought of.

**For instance, first, I like to draw thumbnails to try and find interesting poses. To try and come up with poses and layouts that are graphically clear to read (good silhouettes) and that hopefully direct the viewer's eye throughout the frame to where they should be looking.**

**It's also a way to quickly try out different ideas** – hopefully being able to whittle down to that best pose. Also, when I draw, I tend to get very focused on what I'm doing and it really helps me personally to be able to visualize in my mind how the entire shot should work. It's invaluable time I can give myself to really think about everything in the shot.

Then I usually shoot reference. I don't spend a lot of time shooting reference. It's more of a tool to validate or eliminate my earlier ideas in thumbnailing, and hopefully, during the process of acting things out, I'll find some unique ideas that I hadn't considered before. Sometimes, I find much better poses in the reference I shoot – either more communicative, simpler, or maybe just more appealing. So in those cases, I go through that reference and thumbnail out those poses and go from there.

On really close-up subtle shots of the face, I spend more time shooting reference because it's much easier to find those little nuances in your performance, mostly in the eyes and the brows.

As for any other types of reference – looking at actors in movies that might be similar to the type of performance you're working on, real-world physics, etc. – absolutely! If you have a character that's supposed to act a certain way and you remember something similar from an episode of *The Honeymooners* with the Jackie Gleason, most definitely look at those sources. If nothing else, look at them for inspiration and maybe some other ideas. You probably wouldn't want to try and mimic what the actor is doing, because again, your character is in their own world and most likely, quite a different situation from the one you're referencing in some movie. But definitely go there for ideas. Also, watching a lot of movies and different actors will almost certainly expand your film vocabulary and fill your knowledge database of what separates good acting from bad acting, and what you may want to reference in the future. An animator is an actor, so the more you study film and acting, the better an actor you'll become.

On Pixar's *Partly Cloudy*, I was helping to try and come up with the ways the cloud character would need to move in order to feel like a cloud, yet still be able to move adequately for the performance that was needed. In some instances, the main cloud Gus needed to move fast, but if he moved too fast or too "traditionally" like the way we are used to animating characters, he didn't feel like a cloud. So one thing I used for reference was a lava lamp. Its not a cloud, but it does have that same nebulous quality I had in mind – where you have a lot of squash and stretch, but also where certain elements, once in motion at a certain speed and rotation, continue on in that same trajectory until they are obstructed in some way. So I applied the same idea to Gus's body parts. If he was hunched over and straightened up, his torso and even his head might continue to move in that same direction, same rate, same rotation, until Gus moved in a different way, altering that trajectory. Same thing with his arms. If he moved his arm up, it would very nebulously continue on that same path, same speed, same rotation, until it either stretched to its limit and then began squashing back to original form, or until he consciously moved it in a different way. And any time he came to "rest," those body parts that were in motion would continue on in their previous trajectories. So I got a lot of those ideas from just studying that lava lamp.

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# GENERALLY FOR A BLOCKING PASS, YOU SHOULD REALLY ONLY DO ENOUGH TO CLEARLY COMMUNICATE WHAT THE CHARACTER SHOULD BE DOING THROUGHOUT THE SHOT.

## Poses

So next, I set up my shot and begin to block in my main pose or poses. **Generally for a blocking pass, you should really only do enough to clearly communicate what the character should be doing throughout the shot. If you show it to the director, they should know exactly what you're going for. If they don't, then you probably failed to clearly communicate the ideas you're trying to get across. Possibly not enough poses, or the poses don't communicate clearly.** After you've thought about a character and the shot for a while and begun to block it out, it can be easy to see it in your mind and assume other people are on the same page, but that's not always the case. So be sure that your blocking pass clearly communicates your ideas. It doesn't necessarily have to be a lot of key poses and breakdowns – depending on the shot, it may just be a few – but there should be no doubt what those poses are conveying.

In order to clearly communicate in blocking, I'm definitely more in the camp of fully blocking the character out in a pose-to-pose method. In computer animation, there seem to be different camps about how to work. There's the "layered" approach and there's "pose-to-pose." Of course there's a lot of "grey" area between these, but generally people fall into one camp or the other. The layered approach is where you may animate the character's root, then layer on the motion of the spine and head, then the legs and arms – that sort of thing. In your particular graph editor, the keys are most often in spline mode from the beginning, and the keys you set do not necessarily all coincide with each other. In other words, you may set keys on the root which are different from the keys you set on the spine, head, arms, legs, whatever...

The pose-to-pose method is where you set keys on all the character's controls, and for every frame you create a pose. You pose the character out exactly how they should appear on that frame – from the root all the way down to the fingers and facial expressions. People generally start working in a held key or stepped key mode, to prevent the computer from interpreting any inbetweens while you are posing out your performance. This method is more related to 2D animation and can essentially be thought of as a "drawing" you are creating in the computer. Only after you've created poses for your keys and breakdowns can you switch from held/stepped mode to spline mode, so that the computer is more or less inbetweening poses where you have already pre-determined the motion.

As I learn more about computer animation and gain more experience, I tend to do a sort of hybrid method of the two. Not always, but I've noticed I'm doing it more and more lately. I definitely have specific key poses that I create, putting keys on every control of the character, but lately, I keep my graph editor curves in spline mode from the beginning. Actually, there is a version of spline mode called "flat" in most 3D packages which makes sure that when you create a new key, the tangent of the spline doesn't go beyond the value that you set. This ensures that as you play through your animation, while the computer is interpreting the inbetweens, it won't go beyond the values, or the pose, that you have set. You only want the computer to inbetween exactly what you intend it to.

**The reason I use splines from the beginning is that it helps me to establish my timing more quickly from the start. For me, there's always been a bit of a painful transition from held/stepped keys to splined, because for one, it takes some added time which I'd rather devote to more productive areas, and two, there always seems to be a "softening" of your timing. Your animation initially tends to be a little softer, a little swimmier. So by keeping it in flat spline mode from the beginning, there's no big transition phase, and I feel I can adjust my timing earlier in the process, and more quickly.**

I'm sure that as I gain even more experience, I'll continue to adjust my blocking methods, but again, as long as it clearly communicates my ideas to the director, it will be successful enough to continue on in the process.

### Timing/Phrasing

For me, timing and phrasing are very closely related to posing in the blocking pass. Like I was saying, since I try to work in flat spline mode from the beginning, very early on I can try to hone in on the timing of when those poses happen. And hopefully, I've created some variation, or texture, for the timing of those poses, where not everything moves the same distance or at the same rate. Animation is almost always more appealing when there is some variation in the timing of things. If everything were constant throughout, it would quickly become dull to look at and feel very "computer-y." So that is almost always be determined by your poses and when exactly those poses occur in time.

As for phrasing, this is a term that I did not understand for a long time. In fact, it's still a constant learning process for me. But basically it's a term that describes how you clearly define your character's "idea." Here's how I can best describe it, with an example. If your character is, say, angry, then that might be a good phrase to describe them – angry. You could create a pose that clearly communicates that your character is angry. So that is the phrase, essentially, that describes him in that "idea." But what if during the scene something happens and they now become sad? Ok, so now there's a new idea introduced to the character, one that needs further clarity. If you were to transition that character into "sad," that would most likely require another pose to describe that. Generally speaking, a character is only in one pose per emotion or per phrase. That doesn't mean they're locked to that pose. You can have them move within that pose or relatively in/out of the pose, but as long as you're staying within it and still communicating the original intent of the idea, then it's ok. So if your character is sad throughout the shot, and you have them in a pose clearly saying "he's sad," then you keep them in that pose or that idea until they change. Do you ever see animation where the character is moving all over the place? The dialogue might convey that the character is in one emotion, but they're kind of moving all over the place, bouncing from one extreme pose to another. The phrasing is not very clear.

But phrasing is not always specifically an emotion. Sometimes it can be a character talking and looking at another character for a reaction, and then that character making a reply and looking back at the first character for their reaction. So there are a few different "ideas" going on that must be clearly communicated. If you have both characters talking at the same time, the audience doesn't really know where to look and therefore the communication to the audience is not clearly performed. The phrasing is bad.

**So when you're posing out your character or characters in a scene, especially if they are to interact with each other in some way, there must clear phrasing to successfully tell the audience what/when everything is happening.**

Again, these ideas are very closely related to blocking out your characters in the shot, not only in their pose(s), but also in the timing of when they go in/out of those poses. It's important to establish these things early in your blocking pass.

## Execution/Polish

After you've been able to successfully block out your shot and clearly communicate all the ideas and phrasing of your characters, the rest is just execution. There are a lot of well known concepts that go into this – overlap, slow-in/slow-out, arcs, anticipation, etc. I won't go into detail on those because there are great resources that do a much better job at explaining those fundamentals of animation, better than I possibly could.

But I'll just say that if you have done your blocking pass correctly by clearly establishing your main key poses and possibly some breakdown poses, then chances are you are already implementing a lot of these concepts. And the more breakdowns you ultimately make, the more you define all those concepts in your performance, to the point where ideally, people or the director won't even comment on those things, they'll only comment on the performance that you've created. That's the goal.

By being very clean or systematic in the way you set up those poses – by keying everything all on the same frames, understanding the curve editor and how to get the computer to interpolate only what you want it to – you'll be a great position to edit the performance based on all the feedback you get. Because at times you will get notes saying you need to edit significant portions of your shot. Polishing is the final stage of the process where you get the computer to do those very small, very refined motions that it is good at. This is making sure all your splines are clean, and interpolating correctly between the flat extremes, and really refining all the slow-ins and slow-outs you've planned for in your motion.

I don't mean to gloss over this part, as a majority of your *time* will be spent in this area, but the majority of your *work* should be done in the blocking of your poses.

As a work timeline, let's say I get a shot on a Monday, and it has to be finished by the end of the day Friday. This is generally how my time would be split up:

Monday	Shot briefing, draw thumbnails, shoot reference, think/plan the shot. Depending on the complexity of it, I may begin to set up my shot.
Tuesday	Blocking, starting with the main poses to communicate the idea first, then strategically adding more key poses based on timing/phrasing. Once I've reached the minimum amount of blocking to clearly sell the idea, I want to show the director/leads at the next available time – either late Tuesday if it's a relatively easy shot or Wednesday. If I still have time on Tuesday, I work forward, adding more keys/breakdowns.
Wednesday	I show my work to the director, if I haven't already, and then I address any notes as I continue to add breakdowns and further refine the shot.
Thursday	I continue working on the shot, hopefully addressing all the notes and continuing further along. I show it to the director again, hoping to get a "sign off" to keep going or finish up the shot. If there are any additional notes, I address them right away and keep working forward.
Friday	I continue polishing until I can show the director for final.

That's pretty much it. Sometimes a shot is much longer and much more involved, so the process that I've summed up as "Tuesday" and "Wednesday" may go on for days and may repeat several times over before I get to a point where I can get a "go" from the director to just finish it up.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

That is a basic summary of my workflow, how I approach a shot, and what I do to actually execute that shot. No two shots are identical, so depending on the type of shot – very physical or subtle acting, how much time you have in the schedule, how many characters are in the scene – all these variables sometimes change my methods slightly. But hopefully I'm able to deliver on what is most important in the shot, and that is the ability to make that character alive and believable in their own world, and have them do exactly what the shot calls for them to do.

**The last thing I'll say has to do with your confidence as an artist. As an animator, you are an actor. You are an artist. If you're doing production work, you were hired because you have the talent and skill set that can bring forth your ideas to serve the needs of the production. So you have to make a lot of creative choices, along the lines I described earlier. You must be confident with your choices. You may not always be right, and nearly every time you'll be asked to change certain aspects of your performance. Some of your ideas will be dismissed, but that's ok! You can't worry that your performance needs to be "perfect" and therefore second-guess or require validation for every choice you make. I've seen really good animators scare themselves to the point that they are working in a constant state of fear about their work and their choices, and it becomes very hard for them to actually put themselves, their ideas, and therefore their talent into their performances – and as a result, they don't enjoy animating.**

So just realize that you can't win them all. Just do what you think is best for the performance and, trust me, you'll have all your fellow animators, your leads, and ultimately the director there to steer you in the right direction. If you make mistakes, do your best to learn from them. And then go out and approach your next shot with all the "vim and vigor" it deserves! Stay humble and stay hungry!

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BUT THAT'S OK!

# VICTOR NAVONE



# BIOGRAPHY

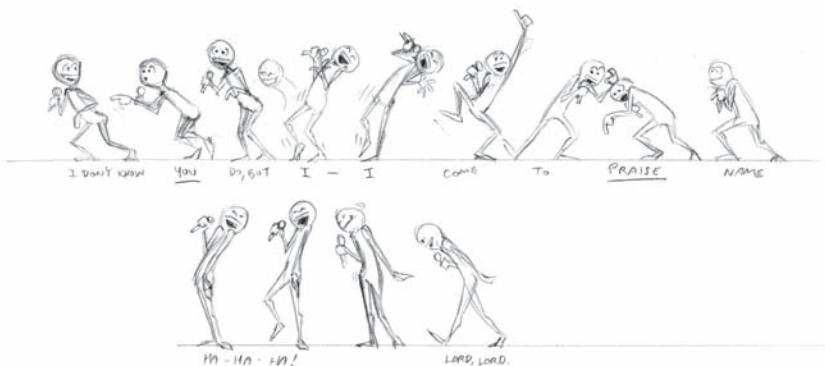
I was born in San Diego, California, in 1970, and I drew and painted from an early age. I always figured I'd get a job with my art, but I never considered creating animation, even though I was fond of drawing little flip-book scenes in my school textbooks. I earned a degree in Fine Arts at the University of California, Irvine in 1993 and completed my fifth year of study in Bordeaux, France. A year after graduation, I accepted an internship at Presto Studios, a computer video game developer in San Diego, where I eventually gained fulltime employment. I started as a conceptual designer using traditional media, but over time I learned various 2D and 3D applications on the Macintosh and became a CG artist as well. I worked on five games at Presto, including two from the "Journeyman Project" series, "Gundam 0079" and "Star Trek: Hidden Evil," the latter two as creative director. In 1998, I started getting bored with game design and I began studying 3D character animation in my spare time. I created the alien character now known as Blit Wizbok and my third test animation with this character, *Alien Song*, went on to become a viral video on the internet. In the fall of 1999, I left Presto Studios and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to pursue freelance work and try to break into feature film visual effects. In early 2000, I got an email from Ed Catmull, then president of Pixar Animation Studios; he had seen *Alien Song* and wanted to bring me in for an interview. I have been working at Pixar as an animator ever since. I have animated on *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Cars*, *WALL-E*, the short films *Mike's New Car* and *Mater and the Ghostlight*. I also co-directed four *Cars Toons*. I am currently animating on *Toy Story 3*.

You can see my work and read my blog at [www.navone.org](http://www.navone.org)

# WORKFLOW

I approach every scene differently because every scene, even every shot, is different. I have to ask a lot of questions before I can start: What is the context of the scene? What is the style of animation in the film? What is the physiology of the character? What are the emotions of the character? Where did he or she come from, and what does he or she want? What is the story point of the scene? Will it involve a lot of body mechanics, or is it a more subdued acting scene? How much time do I have? I try to get as much information as I can from the director and supervising animators up front. Usually I've seen a story-reel version of the scene before the shots are assigned to me, so I may have some ideas about what I want to do even before I've been briefed by the director.

Once I've been briefed by the director, I do my own research. It may involve drawing out thumbnails, exploring poses and attitudes. I may act the shot out myself and videotape it. I let the camera roll and just keep trying different things until I can forget about the camera and get into the character's head. I might even ask a co-worker to help me act something out. Sometimes I look at live-action films for inspiring performances. Of course, there's always something to be found on YouTube as well. Ideally all this exploration provides me with details that I would have never come up with from my imagination alone. These help me add entertainment, character, and believability to the scene.



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Usually I find that the more research and planning I do up front, the better the shot turns out. Even knowing this, I still sometimes rush through planning; it's not that I'm so excited to start setting keys, it's that I really don't enjoy planning that much. It's like eating broccoli – I know it's good for me in the long run, but I could take or leave the taste of it. The way I plan depends on the criteria listed above. If I'm dealing with non-humanoid characters like WALL-E, I find that sketching thumbnails works very well. WALL-E is simple enough (and his rig is fast enough) that I can easily experiment in the computer in addition to drawing. For human characters, such as *The Incredibles*, I don't usually trust that I can get by on thumbnails alone. I usually look at live-action films or videotape myself acting out a scene as reference. From there I may distill some poses as thumbnails, or I may just have the plan in my head as I go into the computer. Occasionally I show my planning drawings to the director before I start blocking, just to be sure I'm on the right track. I should note that some shots don't require so much work upfront.

Simple reaction shots, secondary or background characters – I sometimes jump right into the computer and start animating on shots like these. Not every shot is a hero shot, and sometimes my energy is better spent elsewhere.

Otherwise, I think I do my best work when I've explored every possible avenue, and even better, when I've found a metaphor for the scene. WALL-E trying to hold deactivated Eve's hand is a kid on his first date; Syndrome walking to his jet plane is a punk prize-fighter getting ready for the big fight; Mater playing with his side mirror is fat Elvis doing karate on stage. If I can find a relatable situation or behavior as a jumping-off point then hopefully my scene will be more identifiable. More importantly, it gives me a specific angle on the shot, a touchstone that I can come back to when assessing whether the shot is working or not. Even if the audience doesn't directly get the metaphor, hopefully the resulting details of the animation will convey the spirit of that

metaphor enough to make the shot entertaining and clear. For example, in the scene I mentioned above where Syndrome is walking to his plane, I have him wipe his nose. My thought was that he's a "snot-nosed punk," and this adds to his childish persona. A friend of mine interpreted the gesture to mean that Syndrome had just been snorting cocaine. While that wasn't my intent, I think it's still in-character for Syndrome, so it added another layer to his personality!

Once I'm in the computer, I have different ways of blocking. For humanoid acting scenes, I usually work with stepped splines, blocking out the scene pose-to-pose in the traditional sense. I put a pose on every frame starting at frame 1 and I don't worry about the timing until all my poses are laid in. For abstract characters like Cars or WALL-E, I may focus more on the timing up front and try to communicate the performance with just a few controls, such as the root translates and rotates. For complex physical shots, I work out the extreme poses and then focus on splining the hips to get the weight and timing right. No matter how I'm working, I almost always keep my spline editor visible, and I often animate directly in it, even during blocking. It's not enough for me to just know where the keys are in time; I like to see the changes in the spline editor so I can be thinking about my eases and overshoots during blocking, and keep my eye out for problems like excessive rotations. My workflow is very spline-centric from start to finish, and I'm religious about smoothing every spline I animate.

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AS SOON AS I HAVE ENOUGH INFORMATION IN MY SHOT TO CONVEY MY IDEAS, I SHOW IT TO THE DIRECTOR (AND ALL THE OTHER ANIMATORS IN DAILIES) FOR FEEDBACK. THIS IS ALWAYS THE HARDEST PART. I COULD WALK OUT OF DAILIES VICTORIOUS OR HANGING MY HEAD DEFEAT.

As soon as I have enough information in my shot to convey my ideas, I show it to the director (and all the other animators in dailies) for feedback. This is always the hardest part. I could walk out of dailies victorious or hanging my head defeat. Usually it's somewhere in between, but I've experienced each extreme. If my ideas have been shot down, it's back to the drawing board, and perhaps some consultation with the other animators or the supervisors. If my ideas have been approved, the rest of my process is pretty much a technical exercise. If I'm working pose-to-pose, I continue to breakdown the scene until I have enough keys to support my splines. I usually go down to 4s and 2s. If I'm working in a layered fashion, I start to fill in the details of limbs, facial expressions, etc. I usually include rough facial expressions in my blocking just to help sell the attitudes, but I don't spend a lot of time on facial animation (unless the shot is a close-up and depends on the facial animation).

If I'm doing lip-sync, I always work layered. I don't like to work phoneme-based or use existing libraries for mouth shapes. I prefer to animate the mouth specifically for the camera and situation in my scene. I first work out the mouth expressions that support the acting. Next I animate the jaw opening and closing in sync with the dialogue and clean it up until the timing is just right. Then I work on the corners of the mouth, moving them in and out as necessary for oo's and ee's, for example. From there, I work on other lip shapes, pressing them together for b, m, p's and puckering, pursing and curling as needed. All this is done on top of the expressions that are already there. From here, I try to find and push the extreme poses for more appeal, emphasis and clarity. I also work on adding squash and stretch to the lips and track the chin and corners of the mouth to make sure they are arcing and spacing nicely.

As I mentioned above, before I'm done with a shot I go through every control and check the splines to make sure there are no weird kinks, and more importantly, to make sure I've made a definite decision about the timing in between each key, rather than let the computer decide. This usually just means rotating or pulling a tangent handle here or there, but it's a vital step and I think it makes a big difference in the final performance. I also plot the arcs on the character's extremities – root, hands, elbows, nose, etc. – to make sure the patterns and spacing are pleasing. This level of polish helps the shot to hold up on the big screen. I may show the shot to the director and supervisors two or three more times before I get final approval. Before I consider the shot final myself, I run a high-res render with motion blur to see the shot with greater detail. Sometimes snappy moves and blinks get softened by motion blur, and I need to adjust my animation to make it read.

Occasionally I keep an eye on my shot as it travels down the pipeline through fx and lighting, just to make sure it's still reading the way I intended. If I see a problem, I ask for permission to go in and make some last-minute tweaks, or I meet with the fx TD to discuss the timing of the fx as they relate to the animation.

After that, I get to see my work on the big screen at the wrap party! Usually I am unsatisfied with my work – it's just my nature, and it makes me keep working hard. If I can come away from a film with one or two shots that I'm really proud of, that's good enough for me.



# CONCLUSION

From its very inception, this book was to be dedicated to animation in general, workflow in particular. We gave different artists the opportunity to introduce themselves in their own words and to unveil the “Shaman,” as acting coach Ed Hooks calls it, behind their magic.

In all the various animation topics, workflow seems to be the only one that is ever redefining itself. *Animation Insiders* is, therefore, a platform for talented animators to share their thoughts, experiences and workflow tips. Their contributions will certainly enhance, if not change, the views of the readers, hopefully influencing their careers and eventually impacting their lives. We, ourselves, are striving to become better animators, and working on this book has already changed us considerably in so many ways.

**We wouldn't be writing this had it not been for the amazing animators who have graced us with their exceptionally authentic contributions. Their generosity shines through their writings and we would like to sincerely thank them once more.**

*Animation Insiders* is the proof that even though people commonly refer to animation as an industry, it should primarily be about a community keen on sharing knowledge. From this perspective, it was important for us to be involved in a project that is genuine in its approach and valuable for the reader. We truly hope that somewhere in this book, somebody will find a recipe to achieve magic!

This book was born out of love for this craft. The *Animation Insiders* book series is our humble offering to the animation community.

AI TEAM



# SPECIAL THANKS

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